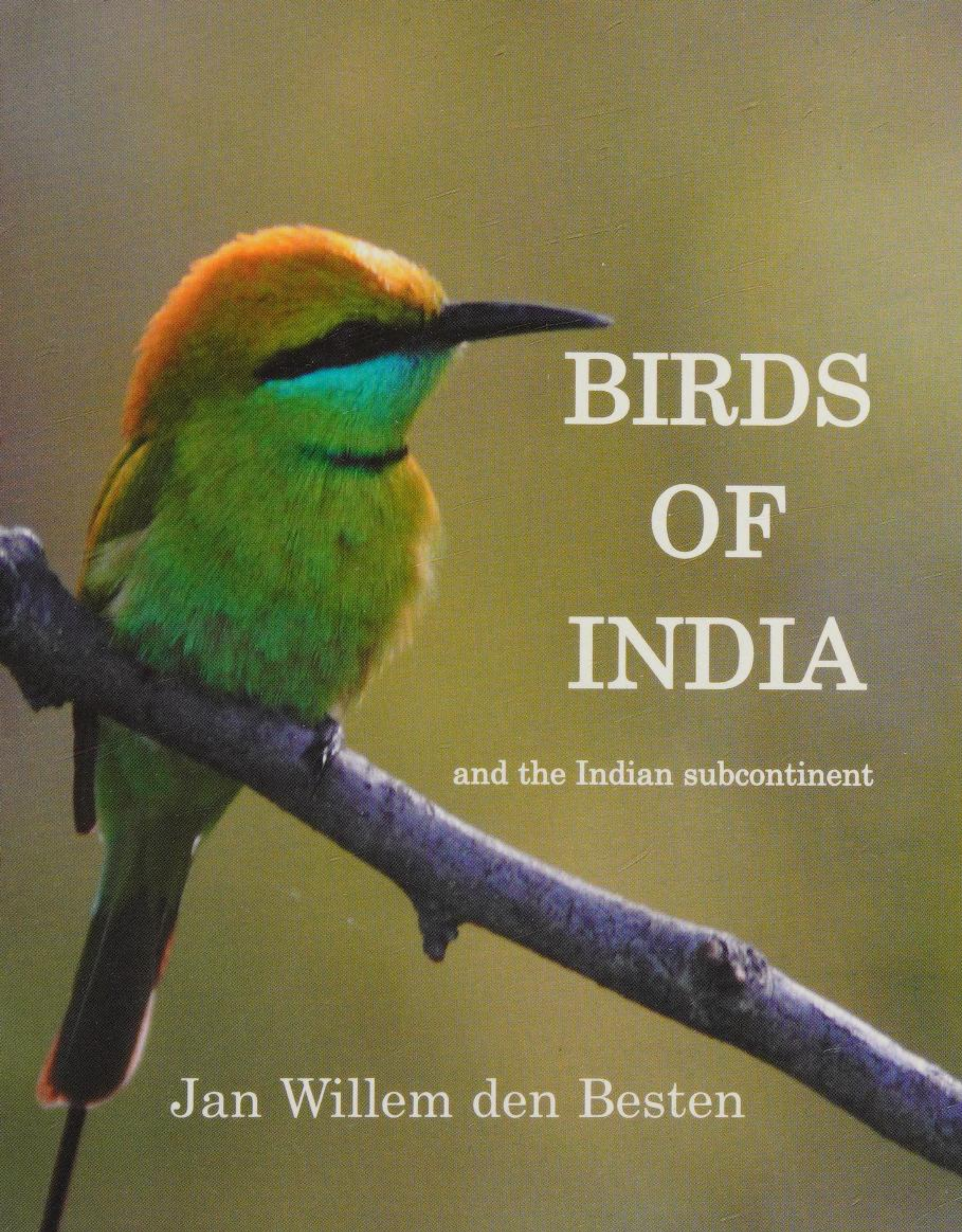

BIRDS OF INDIA

and the Indian subcontinent

Jan Willem den Besten

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MOSAIC BOOKS

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Preface & Acknowledgements

As a bird-watcher in South Asia you are never finished. Even legendary, well-wintered and widely-travelled ornithologists such as Salim Ali couldn't visit all locations and complete the definitive avifaunal inventory for the region. For me, an amateur bird-watcher and photographer with an array of duties and interests competing for time and attention, it has been a humbling experience to visit the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent and take in its natural wonders.

An astounding variety of creatures crowd the many different types of natural habitat, and birds can count themselves amongst South Asia's most colourful, audible and cheeky living things. Although no amount of photographs can do justice to this incredible avian richness, it is a matter of pride to be able to present 600 of the region's bird species in photographs originating almost entirely from my personal collection. At the same time I acknowledge that there are a similar number of additional bird species with more limited distributions and smaller populations that couldn't be presented in a work of this length.

While working on this book I benefited considerably from knowledge already available on the birds in the region and depended on the cooperation and assistance of a large number of people. I wish to salute the people of the subcontinent whose hospitality enabled me to explore the different corners of the region and who taught me about themselves, the animals and the lands they share. More specifically I would like to dedicate this book to the many skilled and dedicated professionals and amateurs who over the years put time, effort and resources into nature research and conservation in South Asia.

I hope that this book will reach a wide audience in India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and contribute to the growing interest in birds. It is the hundreds of millions of citizens of these countries who encounter the birds of this book in their daily lives and are familiar with their habits and depictions in regional mythology and art. I hope that *Birds of India and the Indian subcontinent* will help to bring birds closer home for many.

Here I would like to thank all those who made it possible for me to experience so much of India's natural wealth and who made the publication of this book possible. First of all I would like to thank Reuben Israel for encouraging me to embark on this project and for publishing the book. Secondly I am much indebted to Elizabeth Thomas, who had to deal with my whims while working on the wonderful design. Rivka Israel was a brilliant editor and I also thank Jane Perkins profoundly for her indispensable suggestions and comments on earlier drafts. Bill Harvey is never tired of sharing his knowledge of birds of the region and his support and contributions in the identification of more tricky species have been invaluable over the years. Thank you Zamginthang Mhangte for your patience and enthusiasm, and for introducing me to the Northeast. I wouldn't have been anywhere if Karma, Kalsang, Ngawang and Yangdrol had not taken care of home and office in my absences and I am grateful to Tsering Tashi for typing the index.

I would also like to thank the following persons and organisations who helped me in the production of this book or who helped facilitate the many birding opportunities I had in this region: Asad Rahmani, Suresh Sharma, Nikhil Devasar, Arun Singh, Bikram Grewal, Lior Kislev, Martin Clement, Suresh V., Otto Pfister, Loven Pereira, Madhuri Sharma, Subash Kumar, Sri Dombor Sing Chetry, Suresh Sharma, Babaloo Khan, David Stanton, Manoj Sharma, Gordon Frost, Zafar Ul Islam, Gopi Sundar, Prem Sagar, Tashi Wanggyal, Hem Sagar Baral, D.S. Dhadwal, Murari Lal Thakur, B.L. Negi, B.S. Rana, Sewa Singh, Amsterdam Zoo, Sarahanpur Pheasantry, WWF India, Taragarh Palace Hotel, Delhi Bird Club and the Zoological Survey of India. Finally, I always remember that it was my brother Piet in Holland who at an early age infected me with the bug that causes the affliction called bird-watching.

Introduction

Red Junglefowl exemplify the richness and colourfulness of birds found in the subcontinent.

A region of natural richness

Birdlife in South Asia is prolific. More than 1300 bird species - almost 14 per cent of all avian species in the world - are found in the Indian subcontinent. When subspecies are included, the number rises to over 2000. Around 150 species are endemic to the area. Birding in India can be a lifetime journey of discovery, as it was for many of its legendary bird-watchers of the past such as Allan O. Hume and Salim Ali. For those of us without the time to explore far-flung areas for weeks or months on end, each short visit to any part of India will open up a new facet of the country's immense natural richness. A quest for feathered friends starts right in city parks and gardens, where parakeets quarrel over tree holes, kites wheel up in the air and birds such as the Oriental Magpie Robin fill the air with songs and calls that are full of fire and character.

Wetlands and wooded areas are easily accessible even in the vicinity of mega cities like Delhi and Mumbai, offering the spectacle of waders, egrets, ducks, storks, raptors and smaller birds competing for food and space. Further afield, national parks give us the added chance to view large mammals along with hundreds of species of birds. Frogmouths, pittas, bustards, floricans, adjutant storks, flamingos, cranes, peafowl, vultures, hornbills, pelicans, fish owls: South Asia is full of rare and spectacular birds. The serious bird-watcher can focus on the numerous species that represent each family of smaller birds such as cuckoos, minivets, shrikes, flycatchers, warblers and finches.

Indian Skimmers that breed along rivers and reservoirs in the North stand out in colour and form.

The Tawny Fish Owl is a rare but very handsome nocturnal raptor of forests in the Himalaya.

Hardly any visitor can fail to notice the abundance and diversity of birds in South Asia. There are many areas teeming with birds that thrive during the breeding season on the generous supply of insects, flowers, fruits and seeds that the warm and seasonally wet climate guarantees. By the time most local birds have raised their young, waves of migration bring tens of millions of wintering birds from the north that fill the subcontinent right from the Himalaya down to the southern tip at Kanyakumari. It is all these birds of diverse plumage and origin that provide an extra dimension to the changes of the seasons and the joys of bird-watching in South Asia.

The subcontinent consists of an immense peninsula, the surface of a tectonic plate that is slowly moving northwards, thrusting itself into the mainland of Asia. Surrounded by the warm waters of the Arabian Sea in the west, the Bay of Bengal in the east and the Indian Ocean to the south, this moving landmass has caused the earth's crust in the north to rise and fold into the mighty Himalaya. This dramatic chain of mountain ranges stretches the width of the subcontinent and forms a formidable barrier that separates the hot plains from the cold high-altitude desert of the Tibetan Plateau. The great Indus River forms a natural barrier to the west while the northeast is framed by tropical forests that continue into Myanmar. The Indian Peninsula is dominated by the ranges of the Western and Eastern Ghats. Originally much of the subcontinent was covered in forest and even today it offers a multitude of awe-inspiring landscapes and areas of outstanding beauty.

Life through the seasons

Life in South Asia is largely dictated by the monsoon. Summer rains commence in the southwest and northeast leaving behind several metres of rain and moving north- and westwards where the rains are less intense. Certain areas in the interior and in the northwest receive very little rain or - in some years - none at all. The summer rains retreat in September and then winter rains affect the southeast. Much of the region is dry after the winter months, but weather systems originating in the Mediterranean work themselves through West Asia into Pakistan and Northwest India, bringing welcome but erratic rain to the plains and more extensive precipitation over the Western Himalaya. The coastal areas and the Northeast also receive irregular spells of rain outside the monsoon

season. Cyclonic activity in the Bay of Bengal can cause more precipitation from the eastern seaboard right up to the Central and Eastern Himalaya and indeed cause destruction in coastal regions.

South Asia is notorious for its sizzingly hot climate but many areas enjoy pleasant temperatures for some months of the year. Temperatures vary considerably according to time and place. In April, when Ladakh and Kashmir receive their last snowfall, temperatures in Delhi will already have crossed the 35°C-mark. May and June see heat waves pushing the mercury to around 40 degrees in Peninsular India and well above that in the Northern Plains and the Pakistan deserts where the 50-degree mark is even crossed. The monsoon douses the heat but it is not until November that daytime temperatures start to fall below 30°C.

In the Himalaya summers are generally milder, but even at heights of around 3000m the temperature will reach 25 to 30°C. Although the Himalaya shields India from the bitter cold that engulfs Central and North Asia in winter, the northern plains of the subcontinent are exposed to cold waves - causing periods with fog from December to February. Night temperatures may fall to zero during this season but day temperatures normally reach close to or above the 20-degree mark, making for a very pleasant birding season. The Himalayan winter is cool at moderate elevations. Cold nights alternate with clear days during which the sun warms up the valleys and hillsides. This is a very pleasant trekking season, in particular from October to December or even later, until the highest reaches have received their first heavy snowfall. No cold air ever reaches South India, where temperatures are persistently high throughout the year, except in the hills. The Southwest and the coastal regions are spared both extreme summer heat and winter cold.

The avifauna of various realms

Varied climatic and geological conditions in different parts of the subcontinent have led to plant and animal communities evolving. Areas that share faunal and floral characteristics are defined as biogeographic zones. The subcontinent's avifauna is part of the Oriental

The monsoon gives South Asia's citizens respite from the heat and brings forests and plains alive with lush green vegetation.

While the plains reel under early heat waves in spring, the higher reaches of the Himalaya can still receive fresh snowfall.

Realm with additional birds from the Palaearctic and Afro-tropical Realms. This means that families of birds that dominate the avifauna of Southeast Asia live side by side with families that are normally associated with North Asia and Europe and some additional species that have an affinity with African birds. The subcontinent itself can be divided into various biogeographic zones with distinctive bird communities.

Birds, of course, don't necessarily adhere to the imaginary borders of regions and zones described by man. Common Mynas survive throughout the subcontinent while the distribution of species such as the Black Kite and the Purple Heron stretches from Western Europe to Southeast Asia. The study of biogeographic realms does however tell us something about the origins of different species and the way they colonized various parts of the world. Certain bird families such as barbets, leafbirds, minivets etc. are typical of Southeast Asia from where they probably colonized South Asia. Even today it seems that certain species are still expanding their distribution in an eastward direction or increasing in their westernmost range. The Spangled Drongo, Chestnut-tailed Starling and Common Iora for example are today very common in Kangra in the western part of the Indian Himalaya while a century ago they were hardly reported during extensive surveys undertaken by Hugh Whistler. The Indian Grey Hornbill is an example of a bird that is expanding its distribution in Northern Pakistan, aided by tree plantations along with canal development.

The Himalayan distribution

The Himalaya, the abode of the snow and the Gods, is the region's most outstanding physical feature. Along its width, which varies from 150 to 400 kilometres, the mountains can be roughly divided into the foothills, the main Himalayan ranges and the Trans-Himalaya. Along its 3000-kilometre length the Western, Central and Eastern Himalaya show distinctive features in vegetation and bird distribution. The foothills are clothed in forests that are increasingly moist and tropical

towards the east, due to generally increased rainfall. Species-richness of birds also increases towards the east. The main Himalaya has a variety of dry- and moist-temperate forests, with grassy slopes and alpine vegetation above the treeline. The Western Himalaya hosts 11 endemic species such as Western Tragopan, Cheer Pheasant, Kashmir Flycatcher and Orange Bullfinch, all of which are threatened. An impressive 21 endemic birds are found in the Eastern Himalaya, including Blyth's Tragopan, Sclater's Monal, Dark-rumped Swift and various babblers and wren-babblers. The Trans-Himalaya is largely treeless, apart from the lower valley bottoms, but meadows, stony hillsides, marshes and lakes support many bird species. Black-necked Crane, Great Crested Grebe and species of mountain finch, snowfinch and redstart are unique to this region. Wherever birding is undertaken in the Himalaya a very large variety of birds will be seen. Treks to higher altitudes will reveal new forms with each ascent, while in winter many higher altitude species will be seen lower down in the foothills.

A variety of forests such as these mixed temperate forests in Kashmir clad the middle ranges of the great Himalaya.

Variety in the Indo-Gangetic Plains

The alluvial plains of the Indus, Ganga and Brahmaputra river systems make up the Indo-Gangetic Plains. Tall, wet grasslands and savannah woodlands dominate this area. Though subject to regular floods, this area is heavily populated and under widespread cultivation. The wetlands, rivers and patches of forest in the area carry a rich birdlife with species such as Sarus Crane, Black-necked Stork, large numbers of wintering waterfowl and countless smaller birds including Yellow-bellied Prinia, White-tailed Stonechat and Striated Grassbird just to name a few. In the Northeast similar grasslands are found along the Brahmaputra River while the vast tracts of surrounding hills are clothed in different types of tropical and evergreen forests.

The grasslands that remain today are the last havens for endangered birds such as the Bengal Florican, Swamp Francolin, Black-necked Stork and Lesser and Greater Adjutant Stork. Birding in winter around a wetland in this region, particularly if combined with some woodland and farmland, can yield over 100 or even 150 species in a single day. In

The grasslands of North India are home to hundreds of species of birds as well as many endangered mammals.

Pakistan, the Indus Basin is home to declining wintering populations of Marbled Duck and White-headed Duck while Indian Skimmer and Pallas's Fish Eagle breed locally in the entire region. The Thar Desert lies to the east of the Indus River Plain and can be seen as an eastward extension of the deserts of North Africa and the West Asia. This region is a stronghold for the Indian Bustard. A Semi-Arid Zone is identified further to the east and west with dry tropical thorn forests and semi-dry arid grasslands. Birds include the endangered Lesser Florican, Indian Vulture and House Bunting.

Forests in the Western Ghats range from dry deciduous to moist tropical and are home to birds that are related to species in Southeast Asia.

The Indian Peninsula

The Indian Peninsula can be divided into the Deccan Plateau, the Western Ghats and the Eastern Ghats. The Deccan varies in altitude between 600 and 1200m and has large areas of dry deciduous forest. Other parts are more open with thorn scrub. There is a lot of deforestation and the climate is dry. Typical birds found here include the endemic Sykes's Crested Lark and Rock Bush Quail, the very rare Forest Owlet and species such as Rufous-tailed Lark. Many bird-watchers visit the Western Ghats that run along the western coast of India. While much of the hills are covered in deciduous forests, there are areas with wet evergreen forest that show parallels in flora and fauna to forests in Northeast India and Myanmar. Above 1800m the hills are dominated by grassland and montane-evergreen forests called *sholas*.

Thousands of migratory waders and gulls winter along South Asia's 10,000-kilometre coastline.

The Western Ghats are a paradise for bird-watchers with 16 endemic species. Some of these, such as the Nilgiri Wood Pigeon, Malabar Parakeet, Malabar Grey Hornbill, Grey-headed Bulbul, Crimson-backed Sunbird and White-bellied Treepie, are easily seen. Like in other regions, the endemics are just the tip of the iceberg of a vast local avifauna. Birders in the Western Ghats and the adjacent coastal regions will be rewarded with large numbers of bird species including captivating ones such as the White-bellied Sea Eagle, Indian Pitta, Sri Lanka Frogmouth, Western Reef Egret, Black-capped Kingfisher, Great Hornbill and Malabar Pied Hornbill. To the east of the Peninsula, the Eastern Ghats support a variety of forests ranging from tropical evergreen to dry savannah. In common with the Western Ghats, it has birds like the Yellow-throated Bulbul, Little Spiderhunter and White-bellied Treepie.

Islands and coastlines

Sri Lanka and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are tropical and very rich in birdlife. Sri Lanka lies to the southeast of India and has dry plains in the north and the wetter mountains in the centre. Many species found here are similar to those found in India's Western Ghats, but Sri Lanka has 26 endemic species of its own. The Andaman and Nicobar

The Great Hornbill is a striking bird that is found in the Western Ghats, the Himalaya and Northeast India.

Islands are formed by the summits of a submerged mountain range that stretches from Myanmar to Sumatra. The vegetation is mainly tropical evergreen and 17 species are endemic.

The subcontinent has a long seaboard with tracts of mangrove forests, estuaries and wetlands. Large numbers of waders, tern and gull can be seen at good locations, with species that are not seen much inland such as Terek Sandpiper, Broad-billed Sandpiper, Spoon-billed Sandpiper, Great and Lesser Crested Tern, Caspian Tern etc.

The Lakshadweep archipelago consists of small atolls and offshore reef systems. Most of the tropical rain forest does not remain but some of the islands are home to important breeding colonies of terns and other seabirds.

Many mammals like this hog deer in Manas National Park in Assam are not particularly shy.

Locating and watching India's birds

The strategy to explore India's incredible birdlife is to target some of the more than 600 protected areas that conserve many of the natural habitats described above. Much of the subcontinent's avian fauna however is also seen right outside cities and towns and in the vast countryside. While travelling between sites - or while approaching birding areas - it can be fruitful to check out any small wetlands and water bodies such as village tanks, rivers and drains, where waders, egrets, ibis, stork, rail and smaller birds can be found. Agri-

Intermediate Egrets breed in colonies alongside various other species of egrets, cormorants, and sometimes pelicans and storks.

cultural land in the countryside, especially with scattered bushes, hedges and isolated large trees or groves, will always turn out to hold interesting raptors, shrikes, larks, pipits, partridges etc.

Visits to National Parks, Wildlife Reserves and Sanctuaries are unforgettable experiences. Rooms can be rented in often charming forest bungalows, while elephant and jeep safaris lead you into the world of Kipling's Jungle Book where herds of deer and wild buffalo graze alongside peacocks, waterfowl, langurs, elephants, rhinoceros, and many more species of birds and mammal. There are still areas where tigers can be sighted while the commoner but elusive leopard is very hard to see. When visiting a National Park or Wildlife Reserve never ignore the periphery of the protected area. Inside the park it is often difficult - or not even allowed - to walk about freely but just outside the park boundaries this normally is not a problem. Birds can also sometimes be a little bit easier to track there where core forests open up into clearings and small-scale agriculture.

It is impossible to describe all the Wildlife Reserves and National Parks of the region, but the map on page 28 gives a selection of interesting birding sites in South Asia. For more details and more comprehensive coverage of birding areas in India there are excellent books on the market such as Nigel Wheatley's *Where to Watch Birds in Asia* and *A Bird-watcher's Guide to India* by Krys Kazmierczak and Raj Singh (Oxford University Press, 2001). The 1133-page *Important Bird Areas in India* (BirdLife International and Bombay Natural History Society, 2004) is too heavy to carry around in the field but gives very detailed overviews of birding sites, many of them protected areas.

Questions of breeding

The breeding seasons of birds in South Asia vary considerably from region to region. Birds in the Himalaya mainly breed in spring and summer, but in warmer regions many birds start nesting in the winter months. Many species have second broods and some breed during the monsoon as well. At this time birds become active in song and display, and plumages are at their most attractive. Even if the male doesn't have a distinct breeding plumage, the colours of his feathers will be at their brightest during this period. In most species it is up to the female to choose a mate, and the brilliance of the male plumage

Male Baya Weavers are amongst the most impressive builders of the avian world. They breed in colonies and clusters of their nests can be seen dangling from trees - preferably palms - and electricity wires throughout the Indian countryside.

indicates to a female the potency and health of her prospective mate. Particular markings in the plumage such as crown- and breast-patterns are sometimes stronger and larger in well-fed or older males.

Many birds grow special breeding plumages. The males of most sunbirds are dull greenish in eclipse plumage, but the change into breeding feathers transforms them into dazzling little birds, showing off plumages in red, yellow, blue and purple, some areas with a metallic shine. Egrets grow extended, ornamental crest and shoulder feathers during the breeding season, which are erected in display on the nest and during courtship. Some birds, such as the many species of small, dull-coloured warblers, haven't developed much of an attractive garment that would seem to be able to attract a female or impress an unwelcome intruder. They have, however, evolved strong songs that are emitted incessantly.

Bird's vocal expressions have various functions and one of the most important is the demarcation of a territory. Song is, however, also used by the male to impress the female who can determine the fitness of her prospective mate by listening to the quality and persistence of his tunes. Bird songs can be elaborate and complicated melodies with a lot of mimicry such as in the Oriental Magpie Robin and the Oriental Skylark. The songs of birds that breed in dense leafy forests, such as orioles, trogons and babblers, tend to be shorter and less complicated. Bird sound in leafy habitats is very much dispersed by the thick foliage, which can easily lose a complicated warble amongst the other sounds. Redstarts, dippers and forktails that breed along streams have high, piercing calls that are audible even amidst the sound of rushing water.

Male birds tend to do most of the singing but in many species females do sing as well, sometimes in more rudimentary variations. In some species, such as the Great Barbet and the Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler, pairs call in duets. Birds with less well-developed song capabilities like waders merely repeat calls that are the same for both the male and the

female. Most birds have an extensive vocabulary of contact calls, warning each other of danger, keeping contact while foraging or expressing anger and agitation. While most calls seem to be genetically inherited, the more elaborate song patterns are acquired by practice and exposure to the singing of parents and other members of the same species. This explains why there are sometimes substantial regional differences among the tunes of members of the same species that are, however, geographically separated from each other. A good example in the subcontinent is the Oriental Magpie Robin whose repertoire changes according to the place it is encountered.

In addition to song, most birds show some sort of display while marking their territory or while impressing a mate. Crests are erected and in case a crest is not included in the plumage, the crown feathers can often be slightly raised in agitation. Feathers on the mantle can be rustled, wings are drooped or opened, heads are thrown backwards and tails can be fanned, more extensively in some - like the fantails - than in others. The most dramatic display is the preserve of the peacock, whose wailing calls aren't that appealing but whose fanned-out tail reveals a dazzling pattern of colourful, iridescent eyes. Some birds put on aerial shows to impress a prospective mate. Raptors show off their might and control over their territory by diving from great heights, tumbling and turning, sometimes together with the female. Even some terrestrial birds take to the air in display, for instance the Lesser Florican that makes quick jumps up from the grassland preceded by stamping of the feet and craning of the neck. Sarus Cranes, like other cranes, engage in elaborate dancing, both in the breeding season and at other times.

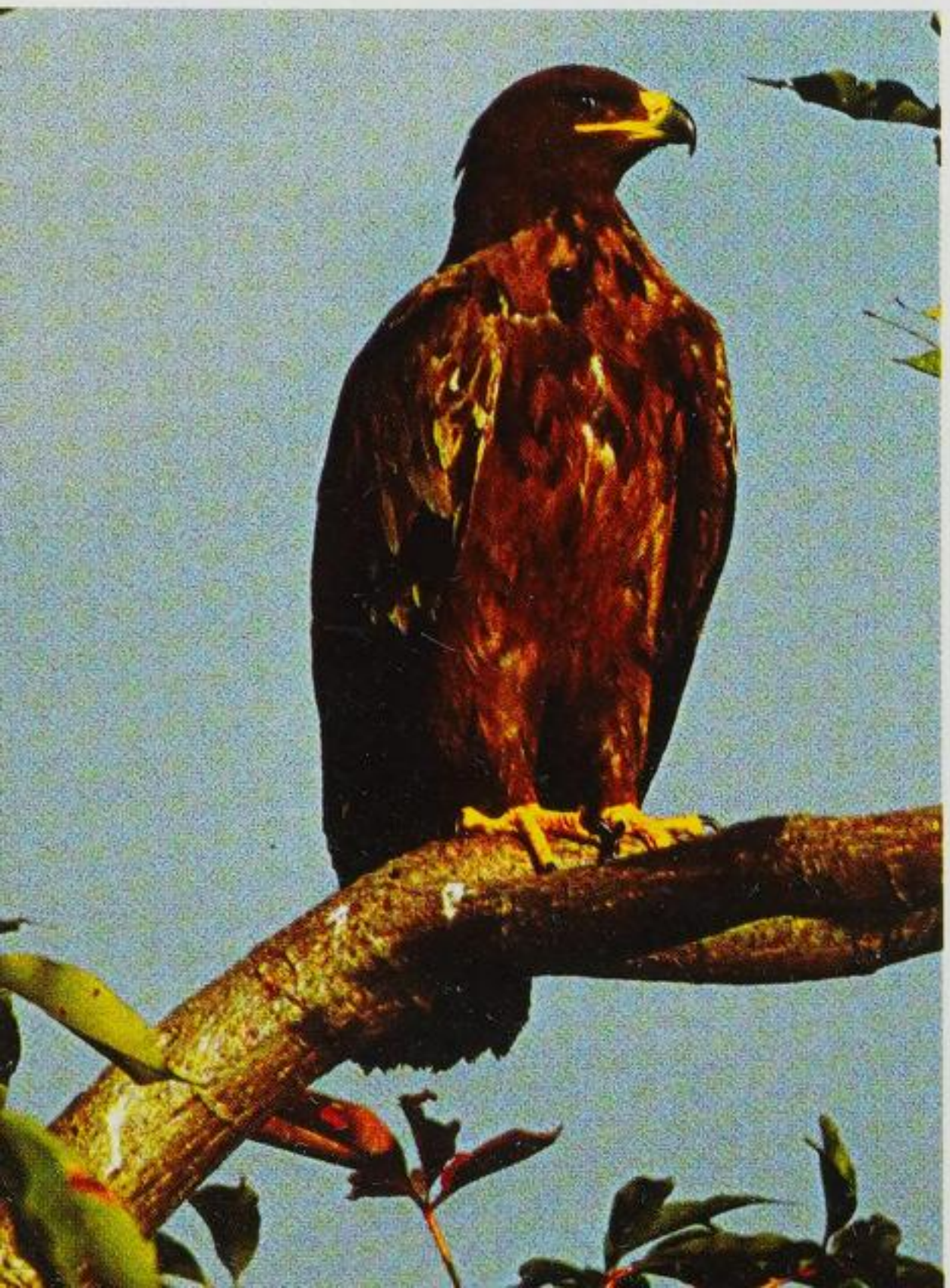
Nest-building takes place after courtship or in certain cases as part of the mating rituals. Most often both sexes contribute to the nests which vary from a simple impression in the bare ground on which a wader or tern lays a couple of eggs, to the huge structures assembled by raptors. Some tree-nesting birds, such as egrets and doves, come up with surprisingly clumsy structures while others put together intricate little homes. Weavers are the masters in nest construction, deploying the intelligent technique of intertwining strips of grass, while tailorbirds stitch together a leaf or leaves into a cocoon. The cemented structures of swallows that are glued to the walls of cliffs

Pairs of Sarus Cranes - the earth's largest flying birds - bond for life and exhibit elaborate displays year round that reinforce their relationship and mark their territory. Being ground breeders, their chicks are vulnerable to predation by stray dogs.

and caves are also impressive. More solid homes are fashioned by woodpeckers that chisel out hollows in trees that are afterwards used by barbets, tits and others.

After the female lays the eggs she will have to keep them warm during incubation. The male in some cases also sits on the eggs while the female forages for food. In a few cases either the male or the female disappears from the scene at this point. The fledglings of many ground-breeding birds like partridges and waders start to walk around and pick up food immediately and are conveniently covered in down to protect them against the elements and the impact of tumbling over. The featherless hatchlings of most other birds stay in the nest and are fed by one or - in most cases - both of the parents. Even after leaving the nest most young continue to demand to be fed, at least for some time till they are ready to fend for themselves and leave the family. Only in a few cases - like the Sarus Crane - the young stay with the parents for months after they are full-grown.

Steppe Eagles breed in Mongolia and Russia and migrate down to South Asia and beyond to West Asia and East Africa in winter.



A region of massive migrations

The workings of bird migration have always been a great mystery to man and till today many questions as to how birds find their way and what makes them set out on their journey remain unanswered. Research has shown that increases and decreases in daylight trigger the start of seasonal movements. While on the move, it is believed that birds use the patterns of the constellations to chart their paths, while some research suggests that birds make use of the electro-magnetic field of the earth to find their way.

Not all birds travel in the same way. Large birds of prey, cranes and storks, use upward thermals to gain height and glide for several kilometres after which they have to find a new thermal to spiral upwards again. Finches, starlings, ducks and geese fly at great heights and have to flap their wings all the way. Other birds, such as wagtails, move fairly low over the ground, stopping here and there to feed. Many birds don't take the trip so leisurely. They fly at night and in many cases probably cover great distances without stopping to rest or feed.

Each year tens of millions of birds start entering the Indian subcontinent to benefit from the abundance of food available throughout the winter season, when breeding grounds further north are in the grip of severe snowfall and extreme low temperatures. It is believed that most of these birds enter the region via the Indus River Basin at the western end of the Himalaya, and the Brahmaputra Valley in the east. Incidental records of eagles, ducks and cranes crossing altitudes of over 6000m in the rest of the Himalaya suggest that some take more direct routes. There are also many dozens of smaller birds such as warblers, chats, pipits, starlings and larks that depend for their survival on the vast amount of insects and seeds available in the subcontinent in winter.

Bar-headed Geese leave their breeding grounds in Tibet towards the end of autumn and fill South Asian wetlands along with large numbers of other waterfowl.

A large number of Himalayan forms engage in altitude migration. Snowfinches, rosefinches, accentors, redstarts and warblers move down from high elevations to temperate zones along the mountains and on down to the sub-tropical foothills. Some birds of the Trans-Himalayan mountains only move down to the valleys within that area while others such as the Common Rosefinch vacate the Himalaya altogether and move down to the plains as far as South India. Species of minivet, drongo, flycatcher and warbler breed in the temperate forests or the lower ranges of the Himalaya and winter down in the Northern Plains and Peninsula or only the Western Ghats. Birds such as the illustrious Black-necked Crane and the more mundane Grey-backed Shrike move eastwards along the Himalaya after the breeding season.

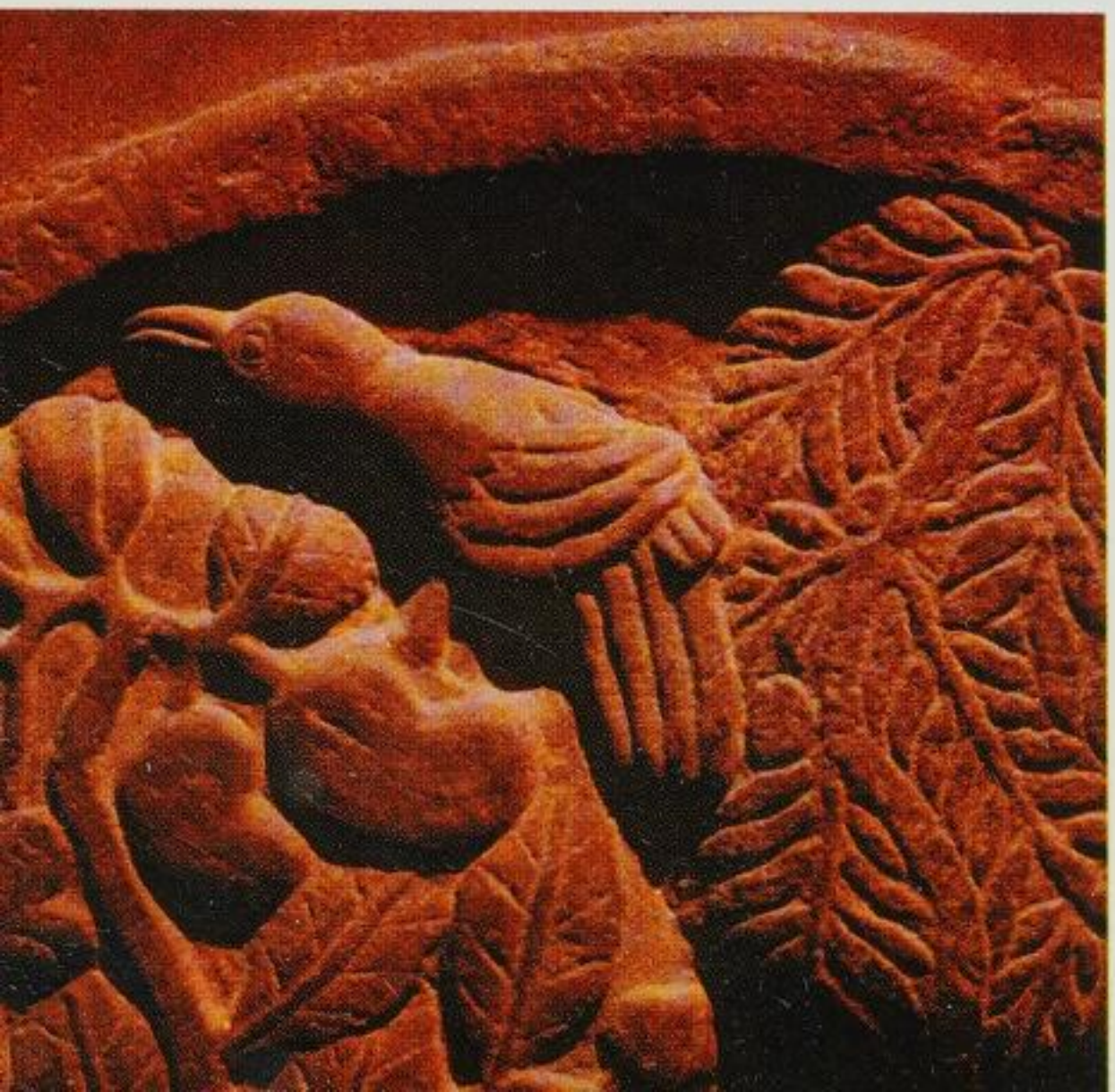
Some cuckoos, bee-eaters and a few raptors winter in Africa and return in summer to fill up territories throughout the region. There are also birds such as the MacQueen's Bustard, Eurasian Griffon, Cinereous Vulture and Desert Warbler that breed in West Asia and winter in Northwest India. A fair amount of birds that are common residents over much of the Indian Peninsula expand their range towards the Northwest in summer. The extent to which some species enter areas in Northwest India and Pakistan depends on the extent of the monsoon rains.

Finally there are birds with both breeding grounds and wintering grounds largely ouside the region that fly across the subcontinent. There is a fascinating migration of Aquila Eagles, mostly Steppe Eagles, that breed in Mongolia, move down south crossing the Central and Eastern Himalaya and then follow the main Himalayan ranges to the west. While some of them winter in India and Pakistan, the majority continue to winter in West Asia, and, most probably, Eastern Africa. The Amur Falcon crosses the subcontinent during its seasonal movement between East Africa and breeding areas northeast of India.

Birds in South Asia's art and history

For many thousands of years, birds in South Asia have been the subjects of art, literature and mythological discourse. Rock paintings created in prehistoric times by hunter-gatherers depict the practical usefulness of birds to man as a source of food, but often also relate to rituals. It is in these prehistoric shelters that the first artistic interpretations of the peacock are found, but also of junglefowl, cattle egrets, spoonbills and blue magpies. Paintings on pottery and sculptures dated to more than 4000 years ago - such as from the Harrapan Civilisation - represent many other species of birds that exist in the region today.

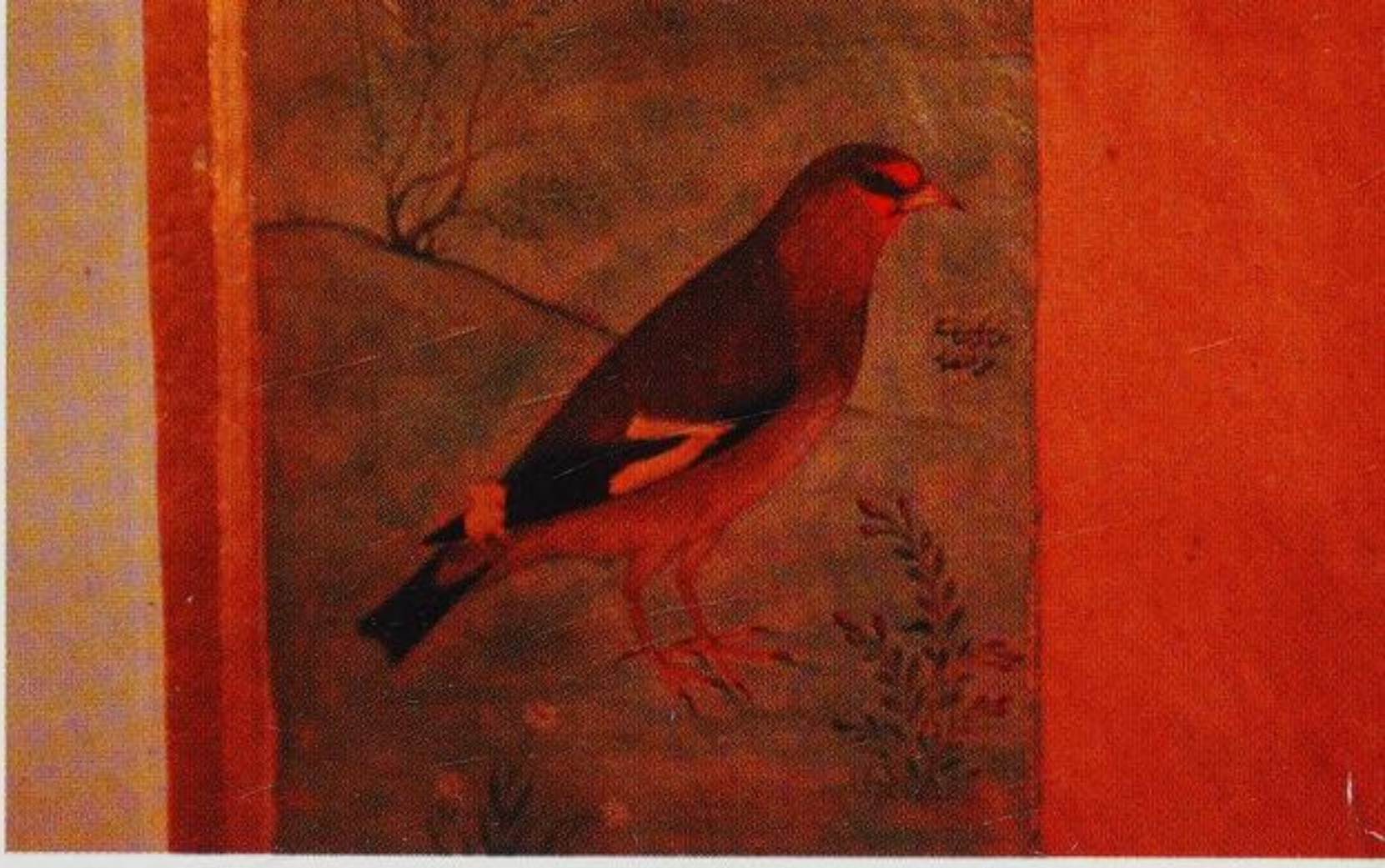
A small Harrapan terracotta sculpture of a caged parakeet, dated about 2700 BCE (courtesy National Museum New Delhi).



Detail of a pillar depicting the Suvanna Jataka story with what could be a scimitar babbler, dated to the 2nd century BCE Satavahana Dynasty (courtesy National Museum New Delhi).

By early historic times birds had found their place in the literature and iconography of India's Hindu, Buddhist and Jain religions. Sculptures created in various periods depict birds and many species are described in India's famous old Sanskrit texts. The Vedas, which are claimed to have been written more than 3000 years ago, mention the names of nearly 250 kinds of birds and provide notes on natural history such as brood parasitism in the Asian Koel and the nocturnal habits of shelduck. In the epic Mahabharata and Ramayana many birds are associated with gods and deities. Famous is Garuda, the mythological eagle that is the vehicle of the god Vishnu. Other examples of birds in Hindu mythology are the white owl that is associated with Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune, and the peacock, which is the vehicle of Kartikeya, the god of war and son of Lord Shiva. Sanskrit poetry describes the tail of the peacock as the symbol of the all-seeing sun and cosmic cycles.

Birds appear in popular fables and folklore and symbolise the various carnal emotions and weaknesses of human nature. While eagles are arrogant, vultures signify greed and owls in Indian myths are said to be overwhelmed by dullness and delusion. Parakeets signify love and desire and symbolise eternal fertility when depicted held in the hand of the Mother Goddess or Devi. Bird imagery has also found a place in various Indian traditions of popular village art. In many areas villagers - mostly women - incorporate birds in elaborate motifs that are painted on the walls and courtyard floors of their homes.

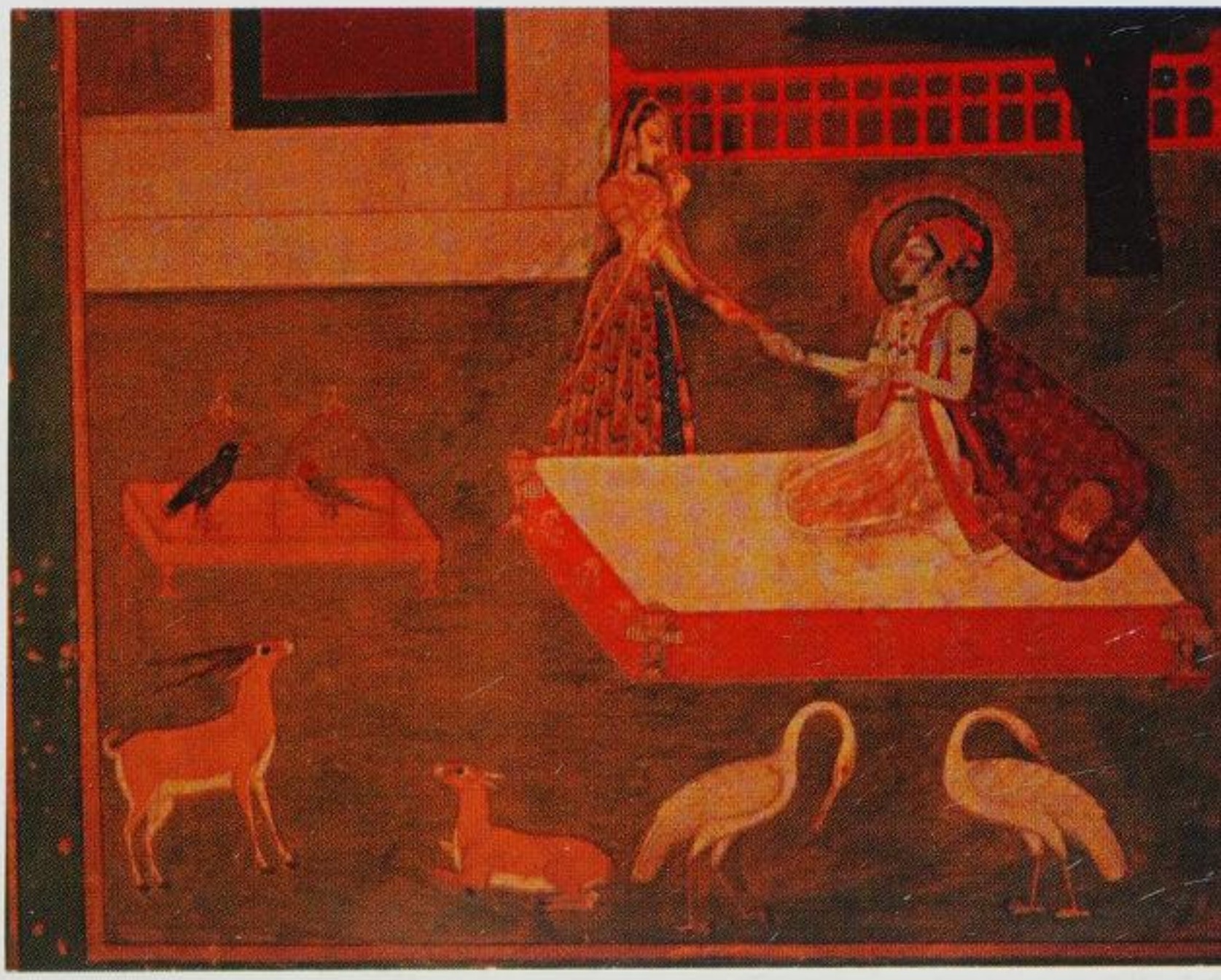


Miniature painting of a European Goldfinch by Mansur, Emperor Jahangir's celebrated court artist (courtesy National Museum New Delhi).

India's prevailing belief systems have had a positive influence on the way people looked at nature and instilled a considerable amount of respect and reverence for animals and the environs they live in. While hunting for daily subsistence was by no means banned from all areas and sections of society, the major religions of the region taught the virtues of vegetarianism and respect for other living beings. In some cases rulers contributed actively to nature conservation, like Emperor Ashoka who in the 3rd century BCE laid down some of the world's oldest wildlife acts in stone edicts, advocating conservation measures.

The Mughal dynasty established itself in India in the 16th century. Its rulers were ferocious hunters who, however, had a taste for aesthetics and developed a genuine interest in the fascinating natural history of their newly acquired territories. Various schools of Indian miniature painting flourished under their patronage. Babur, who established Mughal rule in India, had a keen eye for natural beauty and in his memoirs he describes with affection the animals and birds of the lands he conquered alongside descriptions of the military campaigns that had to be undertaken.

India's fourth Mughal emperor, Jahangir (1569-1627), was a dedicated naturalist who commissioned paintings of flowers, animals and birds that for the first time depicted India's avian forms in true details of colour and form. A painting of a live Dodo, presented to Jahangir and painted by his celebrated artist Mansur, was discovered in the 20th century and is now the only real-life representation of this Mauritian bird that became extinct in the 17th century. While Jahangir saw no reason to forsake hunting or resort to vegetarianism he kept zoos and aviaries and left behind detailed scientific descriptions of animals and birds. He could perhaps be regarded as the region's first ornithologist.



A caged myna and Plum-headed Parakeet in a Rajasthani miniature painting dated around 1750 of Krishna and Radha (courtesy National Museum New Delhi).

The result of a five-hour shoot in Kashmir on 2 November 1934 (courtesy Taragarh Palace Hotel in Palampur).

British rule in India meant a great influx of enthusiastic sportsmen who loved arranging hunts of small and large game. Hunting was very much a symbol of power and influence, and for local princes subjugated to foreign rule hunting reinforced and symbolised their loyalties to the rulers on the one hand while their conquest of nature acted as a surrogate for the political power they had lost on the other. This was the era of spectacular tiger hunts and duck shoots. Up to 4000 duck were shot in a day at the wetland that the Maharaja of Bharatpur ordered to be constructed after an inspiring trip to England in 1890, shooting waterfowl with his hosts. By the end of the 19th century, hunting in India had started to have a more visible impact on the numbers of game birds and large game, and gradually the princely rulers started to more vigorously protect their hunting grounds while the British set out to create forest reserves and eventually wildlife reserves.

300 years of Indian ornithology

The serious study of birds in the region started in the 18th century with the arrival of the British employed by the East India Company. The first to put Indian birds into print was Edward Buckley, a Company Surgeon at Madras who in 1713 published descriptions and drawings of 22 birds. Gradually more work was done through the 18th and 19th centuries by civil and military personnel. The birth of Indian Ornithology is, however, perceived to have taken place with the publication between 1862 and 1864 of the three-volume *Birds of India* by Thomas Claverhill Jerdon.

Ornithology in the region came to maturity with the lifetime work of Allan Octavian Hume, better known as a founding member of the Indian National Congress, but who juggled his professional life as a colonial administrator with his birding explorations wherever he was stationed and several expeditions to South India and far-flung areas such as the Andaman Islands and Manipur.

Between 1870 and 1885 he collected 82,000 bird skins most of which are now kept in London's British Museum along with other collections such as John Gould's, Colonel Sykes's and B.H. Hodgson's 20,000 skins from Nepal. Hume founded and edited the ornithological journal *Stray Feathers* from 1872 to 1888 which formed a foundation of knowledge that was worked upon by Eugene W. Oates and W.T. Blanford who prepared the four volumes on birds in *The Fauna of British India* between 1889 and 1898. E.C. Stuart Baker, who also published on game birds, revised this standard work in the 1920s.

In the first half of the 20th century Indian ornithology made another leap with the appearance on the scene of Salim Ali who became the doyen of Indian bird study. He worked closely with Claude B. Ticehurst and Hugh Whistler whom Ali visited on his motorcycle tour to Europe in 1951. Salim Ali dedicated his entire life to the study of Indian birds and conducted surveys in many of the princely states such as Hyderabad, Travancore, Mysore, Kutch and Orissa. Much of the work was done without a salary and travelling involved long, bone-shaking bullock-cart rides. He later also visited Sikkim, Bhutan, Nagaland and Manipur, by which time he was working closely with S. Dillon Ripley with whom he published the 10-volume *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan* which is still the standard work on birds in the region.

Salim Ali was the first Indian ornithologist of prominence, and he helped transform the way this subject was approached. Through the early years, the emphasis was largely on taxonomy and the collection of skins from the wild that were then studied in museums. The study of birds was done with rifles in hand and birds had to be killed and collected to determine their taxonomy. These days it's hair-raising to read about raptors being shot off their nests and zoological expeditions travelling down remote rivers with several armed men shooting and adding to collections of thousands of dead birds. While Salim Ali initially used the same methods, he gradually became aware of the need to study live nature. In his later life he increasingly argued for the need to focus on ecology and the study of birds in the field, besides studies in the importance and usefulness of birds for humankind. He was a born conservationist - very much ahead of his time.

Sarus Cranes are remarkably tame in India because they are widely revered and protected by popular belief.

Since India's Independence in 1947 more and more Indians have been taking an interest in birds, both as researchers and as recreational bird-watchers. These days ornithological research in South Asia is done by a large number of people from the subcontinent itself, working for various organisations and research centres. Today, an impressive assortment of comprehensive and localised bird guidebooks - as well as dynamic Internet discussion networks - have helped develop bird-watching as a hobby for an increasing number of people in the region. Since the 1990s some excellent bird guides have come on the market, notably *A Pocket Guide to the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent* by Grimett, Inskipp and Inskipp (1999), *A Field Guide to the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent* by Kazmierczak (2000) and Grewal, Harvey and Pfister's *A Photographic Guide to the Birds of India and the Indian Subcontinent, including Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka & The Maldives* (2002).

The interdependence of man and bird

Birds in many parts of India show a remarkable tameness and occur in abundance close to human settlement. It indicates the widespread tolerance to birds that prevails in much of the region and the protection they enjoy through popular belief, religion and superstition. With peacocks perched on homes, swallows nesting in shops and mynas and other birds walking onto verandahs, life in rural India seems interwoven with nature while the distinction between what is wild and what is domestic is sometimes blurred.

Certain birds such as Sarus Crane and Ruddy Shelduck enjoy popular protection, adoration and reverence from rural communities across India. Nesting colonies of water birds are believed to bring good luck and good harvests and in some places enjoy vigorous protection from the local people. In towns like Telineelapuram in Andhra Pradesh nets are put up for the safety of chicks that fall out of their nests and the famous colony of

A wonder-doctor and his captive Eurasian Eagle Owl waiting for clientele in Delhi's morning rush.

Deforestation reduces the capacity of soil to retain water and can lead to floods and landslides.

storks and pelicans at Kokkare Bellur in Karnataka showed its attachment to the hamlet when it moved along with it on its being relocated in 1916. In many parts of India birds are fed by local people, and in Khichan in Rajasthan thousands of wintering Demoiselle Cranes have enjoyed such generosity for over 150 years.

Human-avian relationships are not always as romantic though. Traditional fortune-tellers travel around the country with parakeets or large owls that select cards that advise the customer on the future. While such curious practices won't have had any major effect on bird populations over time, there are some very problematic forms of wildlife trade. Birds such as mynas, finches, munias, and parakeets are widely trapped and sold as caged birds. Also insectivorous birds such as leafbirds, orioles and drongos are sometimes kept as pets. Mortality rates are high and where there are trade links into the international trafficking of wild birds, the impact on local populations can be grave.

The widespread killing of wetland birds is very problematic. Poachers use nets and nooses but also poison birds that are then consumed or sold in local markets, endangering the customer. Traditionally pheasants, partridges and quail have been widely killed for local consumption. Smaller birds are entirely left in peace in much of the region, but in certain parts of the Northeast, population densities of birds are very low as a result of widespread poaching. Killing birds for use in traditional medicine and sorcery is relatively localised.

Environmental concerns and challenges

Environmental degradation is a real challenge in South Asia. Population pressure is high and puts a strain on natural resources. Despite concerted efforts to increase tree cover, forests continue to shrink and are degraded due to fuel-wood collection and the grazing of cattle. Other natural habitats such as alluvial grassland and scrubland are also disappearing because the intensification of agriculture by expanding irrigation swallows them up. Sometimes the well-intentioned plantation of trees also contributes to the diminishing of open, natural habitats - particularly when non-native species are used. In other areas wetlands continue to be drained to make way for cultivation or are encroached upon by shrimp ponds. Mining, dams, expanding cities

The dramatic decline of the now critically endangered White-rumped Vulture and other vultures in India since the 1990s has been linked to the use of Diclofenac as a veterinary drug.

and industrial activities all eat into the ecological base and contribute to water and soil pollution.

Another area of concern is the use of agro-chemicals such as pesticides and herbicides. Certain chemicals such as Aldrin and Endosulfan can instantly kill, not only small birds but also larger species such as peacock and Sarus Crane. Certain chemicals, such as DDT, accumulate in species that are at the top of the food chain. Such a variety of chemicals are introduced into the environment these days that it is impossible to know the effect of each of them on various forms of life, let alone their combined effect. The dramatic decline of lowland vulture species in the region during the 1990s was found to have been caused by the drug Diclofenac, which has been used widely as a painkiller in cattle.

With all these threats it is a surprise that birds are still so abundant in the region. It shows the resilience of our feathered friends. In fact only two species of birds are believed to have become extinct during the past few centuries: the Pink-headed Duck last sighted in 1935 and the Himalayan Quail which disappeared from the radar of bird-watchers in 1876. It is, however, not unthinkable that this enigmatic quail might be rediscovered, just like the Forest Owlet and the Jerdon's Courser that were believed to be extinct for over 100 years but were rediscovered towards the end of the 20th century. But we shouldn't be complacent. Currently 140 out of the region's more than 1300 bird species are considered threatened with extinction, near-threatened or vulnerable. Eight species are in immediate danger of extinction.

Tips for beginning bird-watching

If you are an aspiring bird-watcher, start off with the birds that you observe in your surroundings. Note down the birds for which you already have a name and describe birds you can't identify yet. Listen to sounds around you; it will draw your attention to birds you never noticed before. When doing a bird trip, don't try to cover too much territory. Sit quietly in the shade of a tree near a source of bird food or water and see what unfolds. When looking at a new bird, note down as many details as possible. The overall impression of a bird is hardly ever enough to find the name of a new bird; too many species look very similar and are separated by details that initially seem insignificant such as the shape and colour of the bill, the colour of the sides of the tail, the occurrence of wing-bars, the length of tail and legs, and markings on the belly, wings, flanks, chin and the head.

Although many birds in the region are relatively bold and confiding, birds are generally shy of humans which makes it essential for the birder to deploy some sort of camouflage. Hideouts and *machans* (raised platforms, often improvised in trees) are advanced methods of creating near-invisibility, but there are simpler ways to blend into the landscape and surprise the birds. Unobtrusive clothing and quiet behaviour are obvious ways to merge with the landscape. It can be also very rewarding to sit quietly close to a bush or tree and let the birds slowly approach. This works in particular if there is nearby a reason for the birds to come closer: a water source, an artificial food supply or a natural food source such as flowering or fruiting bushes and trees.

Birds get used to unnatural objects or very constant forms of disturbance in their natural habitats. They accustom themselves to the idea of people going about their daily routine on a verandah, while birds feeding up in the canopy of trees don't expect the 'danger' of a human at their eye level. Roofs and balconies are thus excellent 'hideouts' for the observation of birds. In the same way birds get used to activity on roads and in bustling villages. When a rich source of food or a water

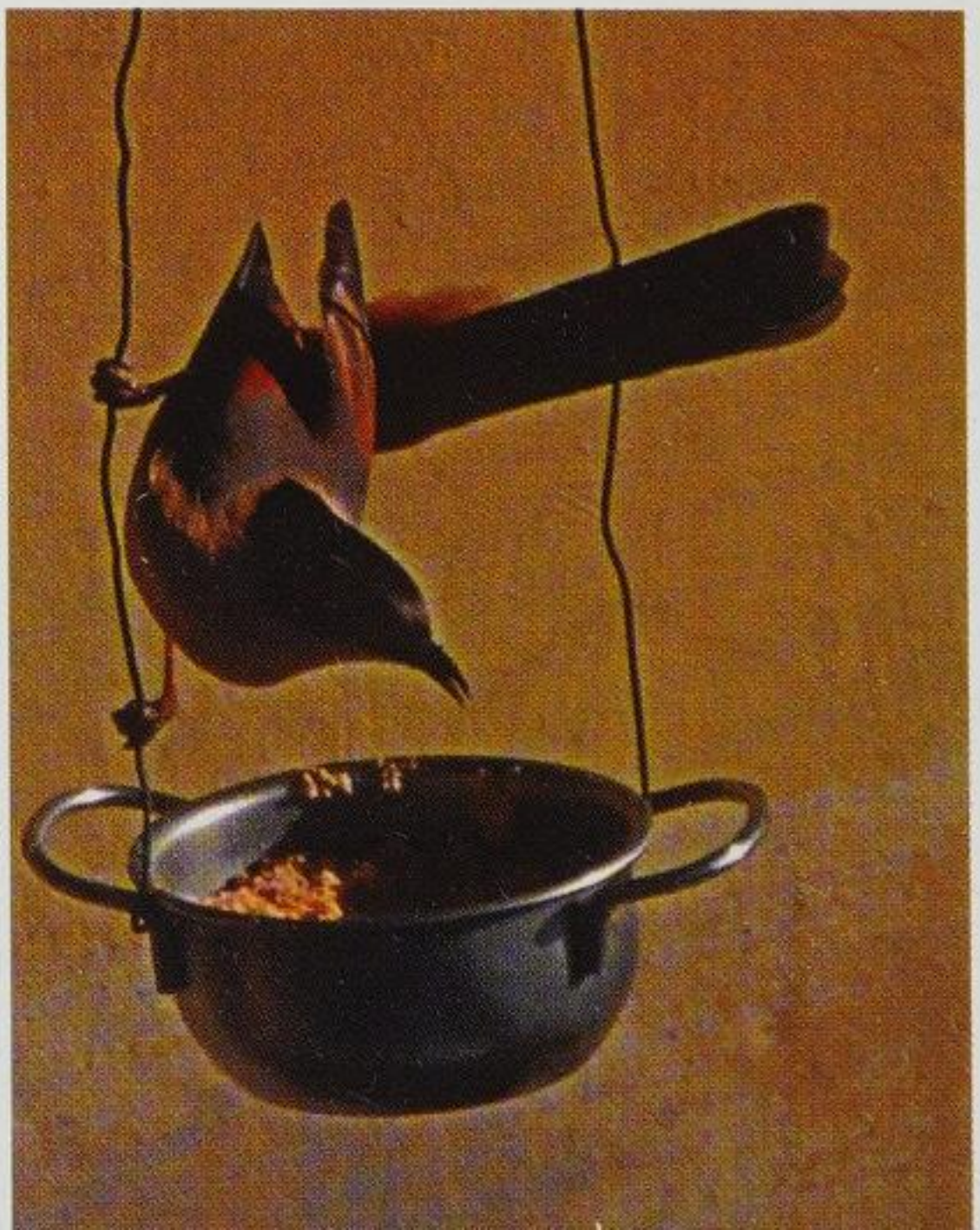
Bird-watching is a growing hobby in India entertaining people across the country and increasing opportunities for eco-tourism.

Water is often in short supply for birds and even an overflowing water tank will attract unexpected birds such as this Bar-tailed Treecreeper.

body is situated near such busy human activity, birds can be observed at very close range as long as you don't behave too different from the 'background' activity. It is good to know that India has an extensive network of forest bungalows situated in many of its protected Wildlife Reserves and National Parks. Hotels with gardens are also excellent starting points for birding activities.

Birds are generally most active from just before dawn till mid-morning. Around midday nature quietens down, but even then birds are around, and certain weather conditions such as increased moisture, an increase in temperature in winter or a passing light rain shower, can result in teeming bird activity. Wind and rain normally quieten the birds, but the passing of a small weather front can set off a sudden surge in migration. Towards evening bird activity once more sees an increase, with the additional delight of roost migration in many places. Parakeets, crows, mynas, egrets, bulbuls and raptors such as kites and harriers rest at communal roosts and are seen crossing the countryside towards these in the evening.

The hobby of bird-watching becomes interesting when you start to be more systematic. Lists can be made of birds seen in various localities. So-called twitchers keep various lists - country lists, site lists, seasonal lists, life list etc. This makes bird-watching exciting but can cause unnecessary competition between birders. Bird-watching becomes more rewarding and more meaningful if we keep more detailed records of the birds we see. Counts of wintering waterfowl or numbers of breeding pairs are valuable for ornithological research. Also the monitoring of common species can be very



Forest birds such as this Rufous Sibia of the Himalaya can be attracted by providing regular food.

useful because very little data is available on fluctuations of various bird populations in South Asia, in particular of those that are believed to be in decline such as raptors, storks and partridges, but also many birds of small-scale farmland like larks, sparrows, buntings etc. If counts are done over many years in strictly defined areas under consistent conditions, the data accumulated are invaluable.

Good light and a close proximity to the bird are essential for proper identification. When choosing binoculars, check various models and choose what suits you best in terms of magnification, diameter and weight. A magnification between 7 and 10 is appropriate for bird-watching and is indicated in the first number marked on the binoculars such as in 7X50. The second number gives the diameter of the outer lens in millimetres. This will be smaller in compact and lightweight binoculars. The drawback of a small diameter, depending also on the quality of the lens work inside, is that the lenses gather less light and therefore give a smaller depth of field and show less detail, particularly in low-light situations. For birds that are seen at considerable distance, for example at wetlands, a spotting scope or telescope is very useful. These come in magnifications of 20 to 40 or even higher and require the use of a tripod because the high magnification means that even a slight shake causes changes in the focus.

How to use this book

The aim of this guide is to present a large collection of birds commonly found in the South Asian subcontinent in an affordable pocket-size book. Species that are uncommon or have very restricted distribution ranges in the region are not included. The book is most comprehensive for those areas that are most likely to be visited by bird-watchers: North India and the Peninsula, in particular the Western Ghats.

The text that accompanies the photographs explains the main identification marks of each species. Where important, calls and songs are described. A few species are not illustrated with a photo, but in those cases the text points out the characteristics that are essential to separate it from similar species on the same pages that do have a photograph. The sizes of birds are mostly taken from Salim Ali and S. Dillion Ripley's standard *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan*, (OUP, 1971-99), unless there are obvious errors, in which case the size of the bird is taken from other sources.

Distributions of species are described in the captions. The captions also give an indication of the type of habitats the birds are generally found in. Standard terminology is used to describe the various body and plumage parts of the birds. On the following page these terms are illustrated in two photographs. Altitudes and habitats give a good indication of where a bird can be expected, although birds do tend to turn up at unexpected places, sometimes outside their regular distribution range.

The names of birds and the sequence of species generally follows *An Annotated Checklist of the Birds of the Oriental Region* by Inskipp, Lindsey and Duckworth (1996). In many cases these names are different from earlier published works on birds, notably the books written by Salim Ali. There is considerable debate and confusion around the use of various English names, but new publications now follow the names of this Annotated Checklist.

In order to find a particular bird, the index of species at the end of the book lists all species that are described in the text, and most of which are illustrated with a photograph. The list is alphabetical according to the last part of the bird name. All warblers, leaf warblers and bush warblers for example are listed under 'warblers'. A species such as the Chestnut-headed Tesia is also listed under 'warblers' but because the last part of the name is different, 'tesia' also has an entry of its own which then refers to 'warblers'.

Birding areas in South Asia

The map below shows some of South Asia's many exciting birding areas. There are hundreds of excellent birding areas, and this is only a small selection of the various National Parks (NP), Wildlife Sanctuaries (WS), Tiger Reserves (TR), Bird Sanctuaries (BS), Forest Reserves (FR) and unprotected areas. The dots on the map give the general location of the birding site.

Map not to scale.

India

1 Okhla BS
2 Sultanpur NP
3 Bhindawas WS
4 Harike BS
5 Desert NP
6 Keoladeo NP
7 Khichan Village
8 Ranthambore NP and TR
9 Sambhar Lake
10 Sariska TR
11 Flamingo City
12 Marine NP and WS
13 Gir NP
14 Wild Ass WS and Nanda Island
15 Nal Sarovar WS
16 Sajay Gandhi NP
17 Thane Creek
18 Mahul-Sewri Mudflats
19 Tadoba-Andhari TR
20 Navegaon NP
21 Jawaharlal Nehru Bustard Sanctuary
22 Carambolim Lake
23 Dandeli WS
24 Hampi and Daroji BS
25 Nagarhole NP
26 Bandipur NP
27 Kokkare Bellur
28 Wynaad WS
29 Silent Valley NP
30 Periyar WS
31 Koonthangulam BS
32 Big Tank and Sakkarakotai Kanmai
33 Berijam (Kodaikanal)
34 Annamalai WS
35 Mudumalai NP
36 Point Calimere WS and BS
37 Vedanthangal and Karikili BS
38 Pulicat Lake
39 Sri Lankamalleshwara WS
40 Rajiv Gandhi WS
41 Coringa WS
42 Telineelapuram
43 Chilka Lake
44 Satkosia Gorge WS
45 Bhitarkanika WS and NP
46 Sundarban Biosphere Reserve
47 Dampa TR
48 Loktak Lake NP
49 Puliebadze-Dzukou-Japfu
50 Nampadha NP/ Kamlag WS
51 Mehao WS
52 Pakhui WS
53 Kaziranga NP
54 Manas NP
55 Nokrek NP
56 Lava-Neora Valley NP
57 Pangolakha WS
58 Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary
59 Kawar Lake WS
60 Palaman TR
61 Kanha NP
62 Pench TR
63 Bori WS
64 Madhav NP
65 Bhandhavgarh NP
66 National Chambal WS
67 Kishanpur WS
68 Dudhwa NP
69 Patna BS
70 Corbett NP
71 Valley of Flowers NP
72 Nanda Devi NP
73 Pong Dam Lake WS
74 Great Himalayan NP
75 Pin Valley NP
76 Gulmarg WS
77 Nubra Valley
78 Pangong Tso Lake
79 Tso Morari Lake
80 Hemis NP
81 Mt. Harriet NP
82 Chiriya Tapa

Pakistan

1 Palas Valley
2 Murree, Ayubia NP
3 Margalla Hills NP
4 Rawal Lake
5 Tanda Dam
6 Cashma Barrage
7 Taunsa Barrage
8 Lal Sohanra NP
9 Indus Dolphine Reserve
10 Deh Akro-II Desert Wetland Complex
11 Miani Hor
12 Manchar Lake
13 Kirthar NP
14 Haleji Lake WS
15 Kinjhar Lake WS
16 Indus Delta

Nepal

1 Phulchowki
2 Everest (Sagarmatha) NP and Trek
3 Barun Valley
4 Langtang NP and Trek
5 Pokhara
6 Annapurna/ Jomsom Trek
7 Mustang
8 Shey-Poksundo NP
9 Bardia NP
10 Royal Chitwant NP
11 Kosi Barrage

Bhutan

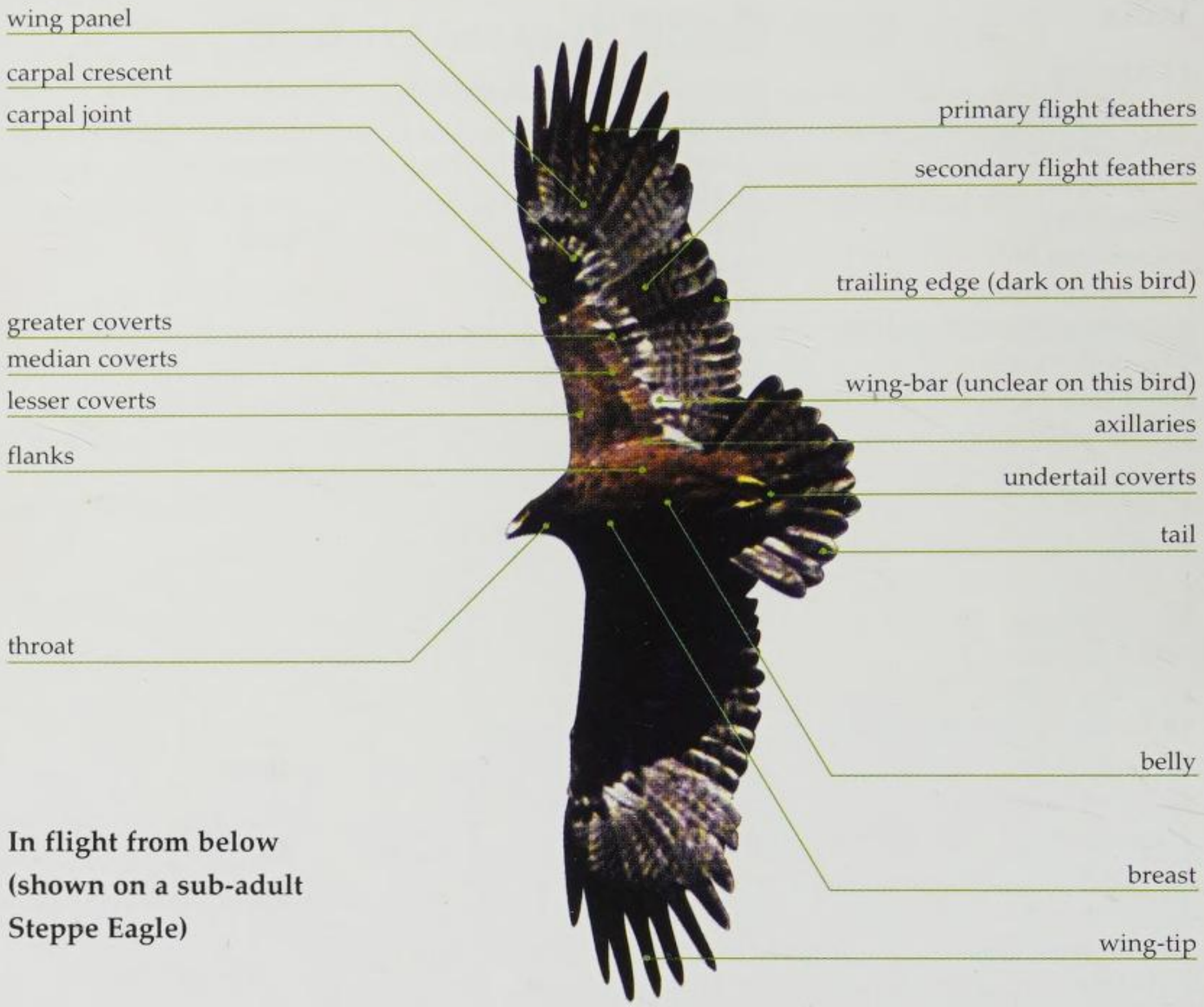
1 Paro Valley
2 Dochula
3 Wangdiphodrang - Tongsa Road
4 Shemgang Road

Bangladesh

1 Sundarbans
2 Hakaluki Haor
3 Bhawal NP
4 Teknaf Game Reserve
5 Ganges - Brahmaputra - Meghna Delta
6 Madhupur
7 Sunamganj Haor Basin
8 (Sri Mangal) Hail Haor

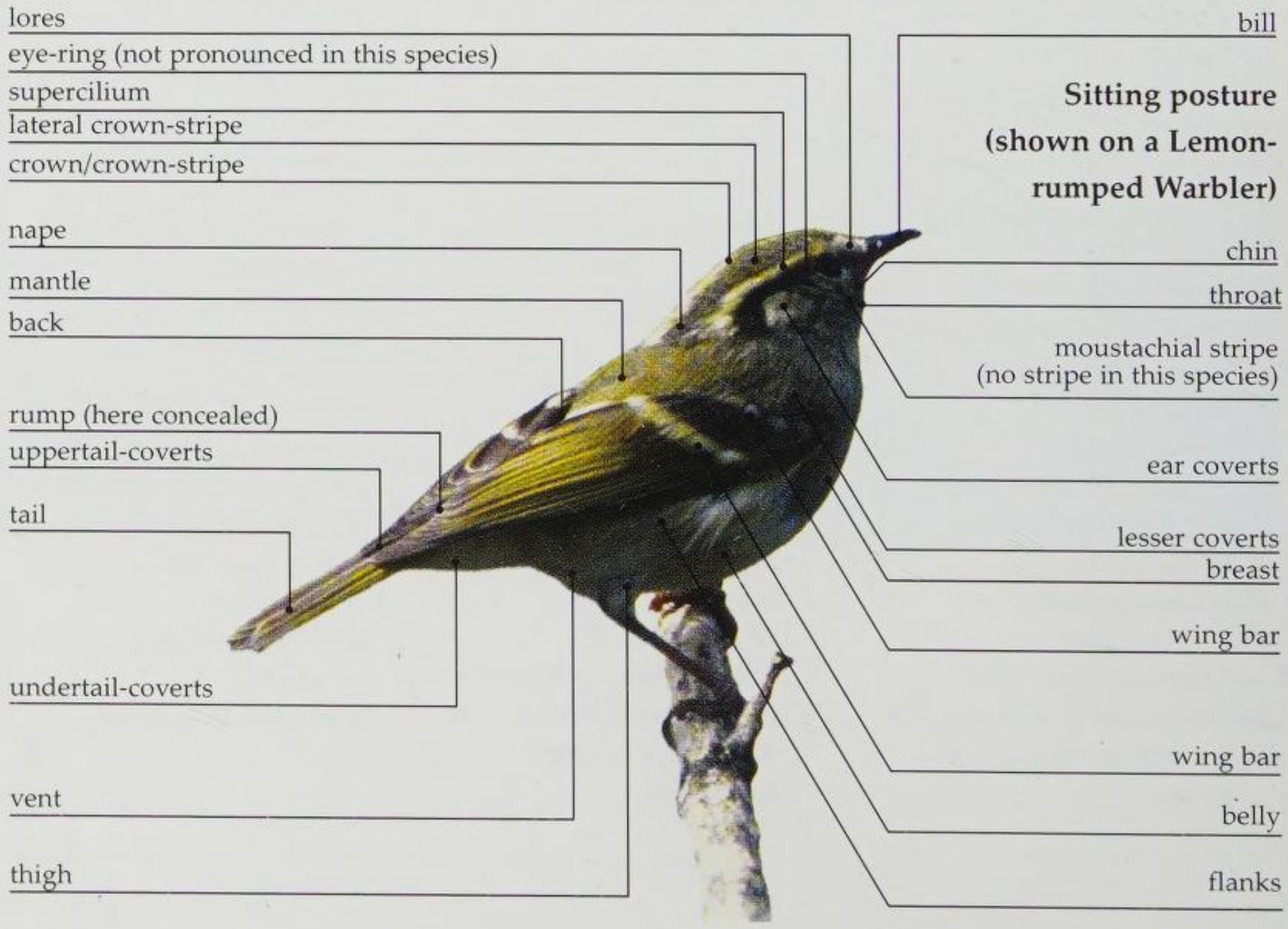
Sri Lanka

1 Kelani Rver Forest Reserve
2 Muthurajawela Marshes
3 Ingiriya Forest Reserve
4 Sinharaja World Heritage Site
5 Knuckles
6 Nuwara Elia
7 Yala NP
8 Horton Plains NP



In flight from below (shown on a sub-adult Steppe Eagle)

Descriptive parts of a bird



Sitting posture (shown on a Lemon-rumped Warbler)

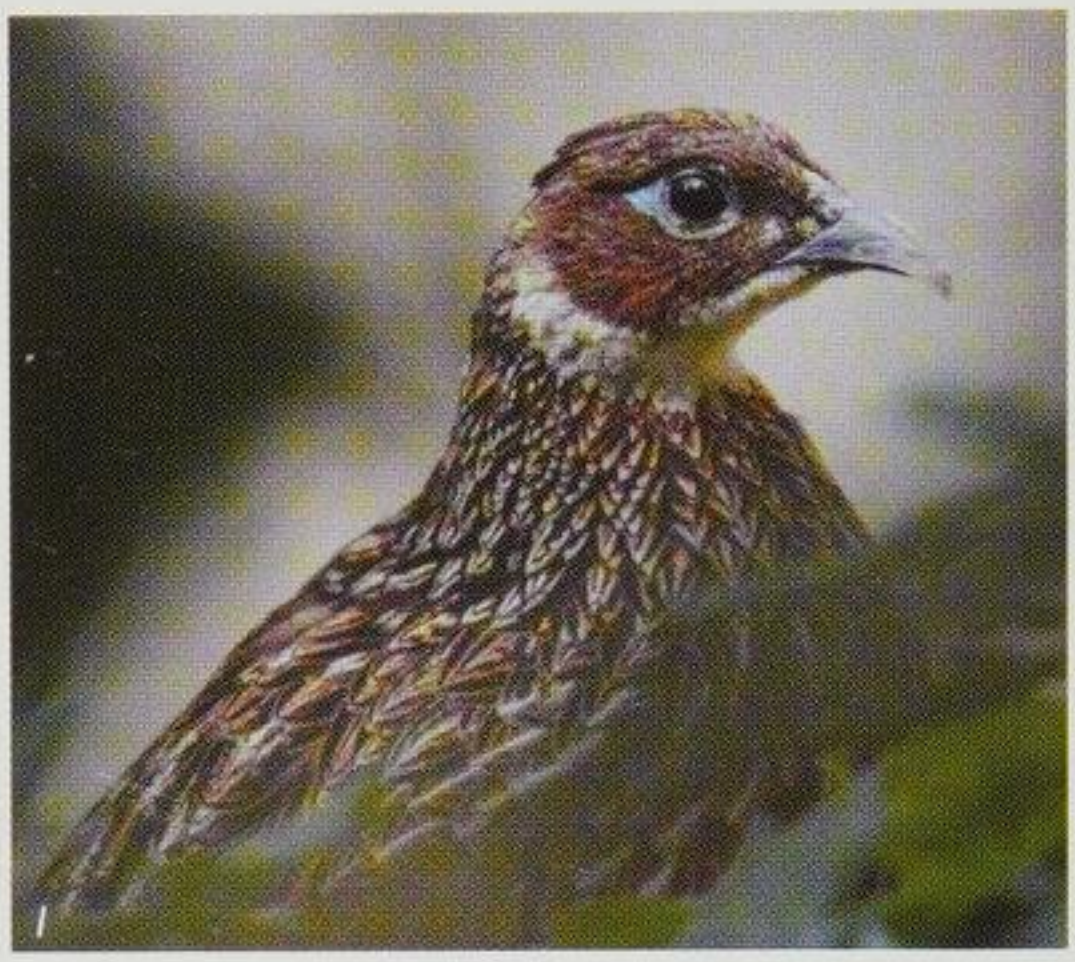
Pheasants & junglefowl

Kalij Pheasants breed in various types of forest from 400 to 2500m.

Pheasants - the crème de la crème of the Himalaya - are brightly coloured, stout, ground birds that feed on seeds, shoots, leaves and insects. Some species are secretive, others readily seen in ideal habitat.

The **Kalij Pheasant** (64cm) is one of the most familiar of Himalayan pheasants, unmistakably black with arched tail feathers. Its crest can be fully erected and is white or black. Various races have varying quantities of white on the breast and rump. Females (see photo p 33) are brown and both sexes have a red face-patch. Loud chuckling and chirping calls. The **Koklass Pheasant** (61cm) is a warm-chestnut with grey flanks and upperparts. The green head has a double crest. Both the male and brown female have a white patch on the side of the neck. Although difficult to sight, the male has a deep crowing call: 'kha-kha-kha kokras, kokras'. The **Western Tragopan** (71cm) has a distinctive spotted plumage. It calls *'khwaaah'*. The **Satyr Tragopan** (64cm) is similarly dotted with white but has more extensive red in the plumage and a blue throat. The call is described as a wailing 'ghuwaah'.

2 Koklass Pheasants inhabit Himalayan forests between 2000 and 4000m.
3 Western Tragopans inhabit similar habitats in the W Himalaya.
4 Satyr Tragopans breed in thick forest in the C Himalaya to over 4000m.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2

The **Himalayan Monal** (72cm) is a most brilliantly coloured pheasant. The blue back and green neck have a metallic shine, and as it sets off in typical flight down slopes it displays a conspicuous orange tail. The smaller female is brown with light streaks, a white throat and a blue patch around the eye. Call is a high 'ghluweee'. The **Blood Pheasant** (46cm) is unmistakable. The **Cheer Pheasant** (76-118cm) has a long, straight, brown-banded tail. Grey and brown-barred with black, the male has a grey neck while the female is overall brown. Both sexes have a red eye-patch and a horizontal crest. Their call is a loud 'chirapir, chirapir' etc.

3

1 Female Himalayan Monal.
2 Blood Pheasants are found on steep hillsides up to 4600m in the C and E Himalaya.
3 Cheer Pheasants breed on grassy slopes between 1400 and 3500m in the W Himalaya.

Himalayan Monals live in open forest and meadows in the Himalaya to over 4000m.

Red Junglefowl are distributed in the jungles of the Low Himalaya, C and E India.

The **Red Junglefowl** (43-66cm) is the obvious ancestor of the domestic rooster. The male is adorned with extended golden neck feathers. Note also the red face-patch and comb, black underparts and sickle-shaped tail. The **Grey Junglefowl** (60-80cm) has a grey body with fine dark streaking. The female has white underparts scalloped with black. Call of the male described as 'kuka-kura-kuk'. The **Indian Peafowl** (92-122cm) is the proudest of Indian birds and is surprisingly common in some of India's forests and national parks, and also in towns and villages. The female is brown with whitish face, throat and belly, lacks long uppertail coverts.

2 Grey Junglefowl live in forests in W, S and C India.
3 Female Red Junglefowl.
4 Male Indian Peafowl.
5 Female Kalij Pheasant (see p 31).

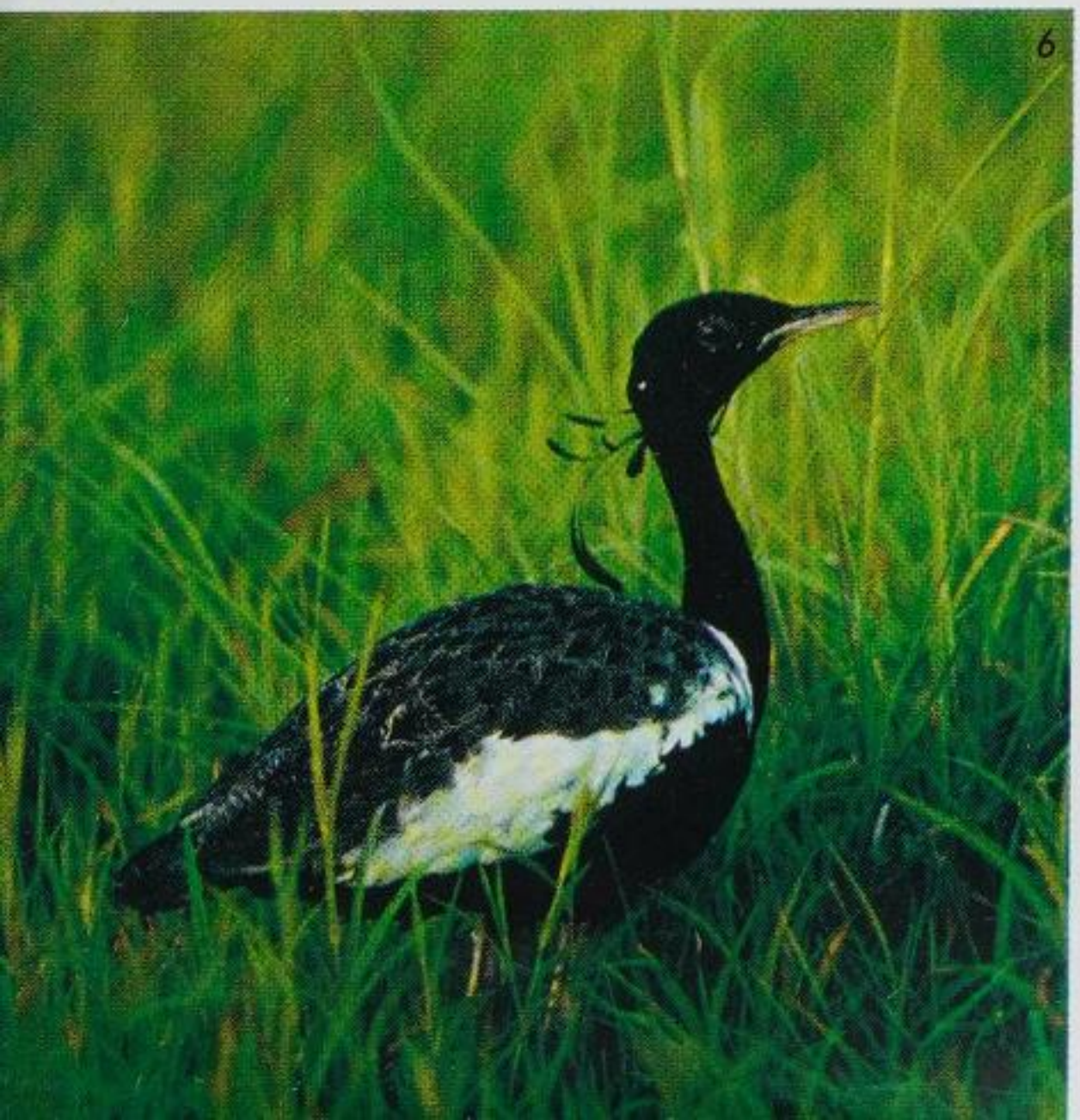
Partridge, quail, spurfowl, bustard

Grey Francolins breed in dry scrub and amid cultivation in most of the Indian plains.

Traditionally known for their tasty meat, partridges and quails are plump terrestrial birds that feed on seeds and inhabit a variety of dry and moist habitats ranging from standing crops and forest edges to dry, stony ground and semi-desert. Note that quail are smaller and more secretive. Bustards, not related to pheasants and partridges, are large birds of the subcontinent's grassy plains and (semi-)deserts.

A familiar sandy-brown Indian partridge is the **Grey Francolin** (33cm). Finely barred with white, the throat is bordered with black and the crown is buff. Its call is a loud 'kukejew, kukejew'. The male **Black Francolin** (34cm) has black underparts dotted with white, a chestnut collar and a black face with white cheeks. The female is brown, scalloped with dark brown and buff. The rasping five-syllable call is preceded by a 'click'. The **Swamp Francolin** (37cm) looks like the Grey Francolin but has orange on the throat, sides of tail and flight feathers. The **Common Quail** (20cm) used to be a numerous winter visitor to the subcontinent but it has shown a decline over the past century. This brown-backed quail with light underparts and dark stripes on the throat shows a light supercilium. It will fly up just in front of your feet with a 'tjirr' or 'chak-chak'. On spring migration it calls a pleasant 'wet-me-lips'. The **Rain Quail** (18cm, no photo) is similar but has broad dark streaking on the underparts. The **Jungle Bush Quail** (17cm) is finely barred black below with chestnut throat and supercilium. The female is similar but without the black barring. Its call is a soft 'whi-whi-whi' etc. The very similar **Rock Bush Quail** (17cm, no photo) of C and W India lacks the chestnut supercilium. The female is plain-coloured. The tiny **Barred Buttonquail** (15cm) has barred underparts, a chestnut belly and light face with some fine dark barring. Call is a drumming 'drrrrrrrrrr'. The **Yellow-legged Buttonquail** (15cm, no photo) lacks barring and has chestnut on the upper breast and upper back. The spurfowl of C and S India are larger than partridges. The **Red Spurfowl** (36cm, no photo) is entirely red-brown while the **Painted Spurfowl** (32cm, no photo) is black with white dots on the head, neck and breast, and chestnut with dark and white dots on the upperparts. The female is plain-coloured. A species in decline, the **Indian Bustard** (110cm) is unmistakable. The **Lesser Florican** (48cm) is black with a brown back and white shoulder-patches. Note the extended feathers on the crown. Females are brown with dark scalloping on the back and rufous in the wings. It is rare, with a patchy distribution in NW, W and C India.

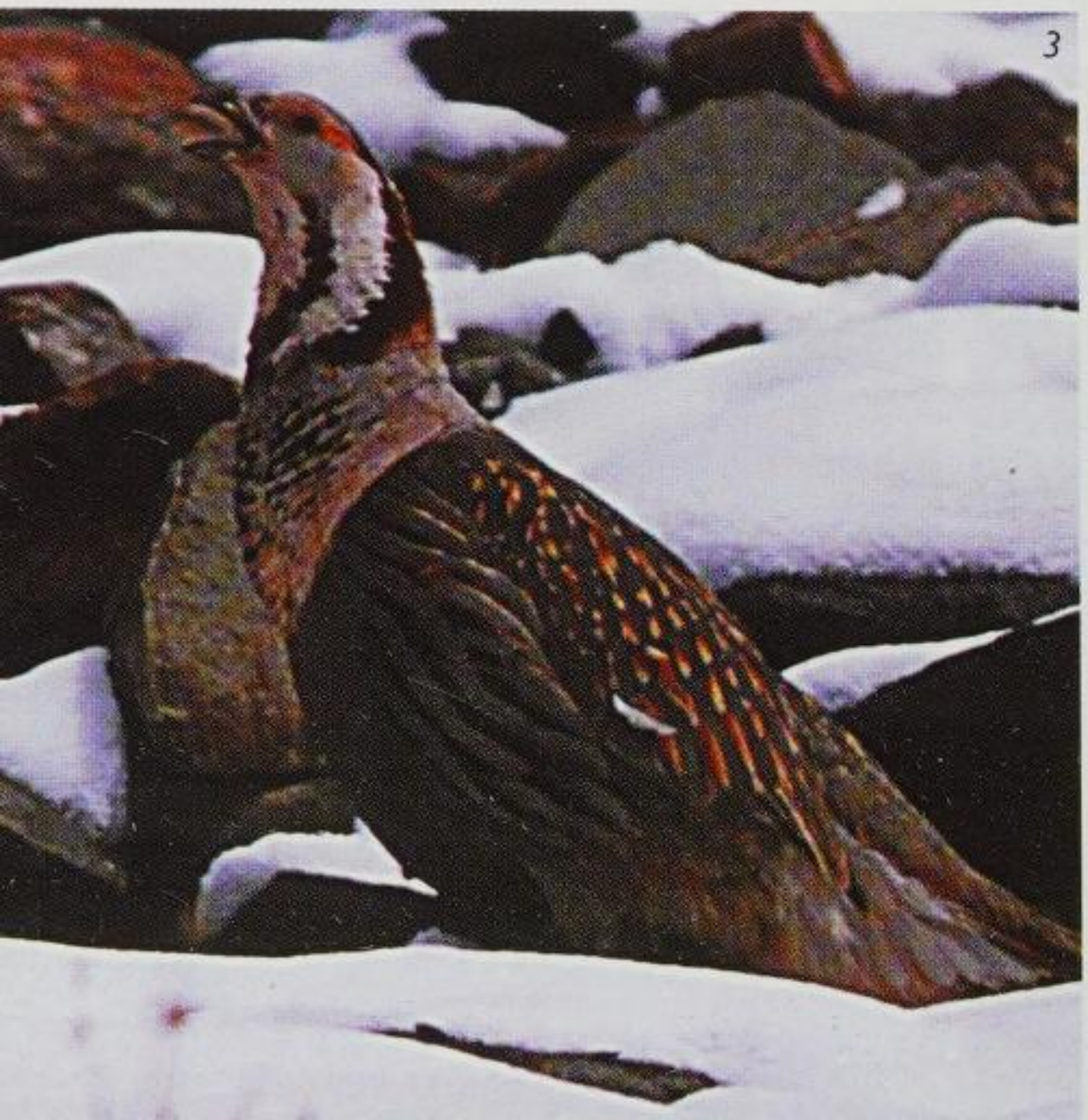
1 Black Francolins occur in moister habitats than Grey Francolins and are commonly found in cultivation, plantations and forest edges in the N Indian plains and foothills.
2 Common Quail.
3 Barred Buttonquail live in scrub and fields across most of India.
4 Swamp Francolins reside in grasslands in the terai along the C and E Himalaya.
5 Jungle Bush Quail - here a female - are distributed in NW, C and S India.
6 Lesser Floricans inhabit grasslands. They are rare, with a patchy distribution in NW, W and C India.
7 Indian Bustards are found in grassland and semi-desert in NW and W India.

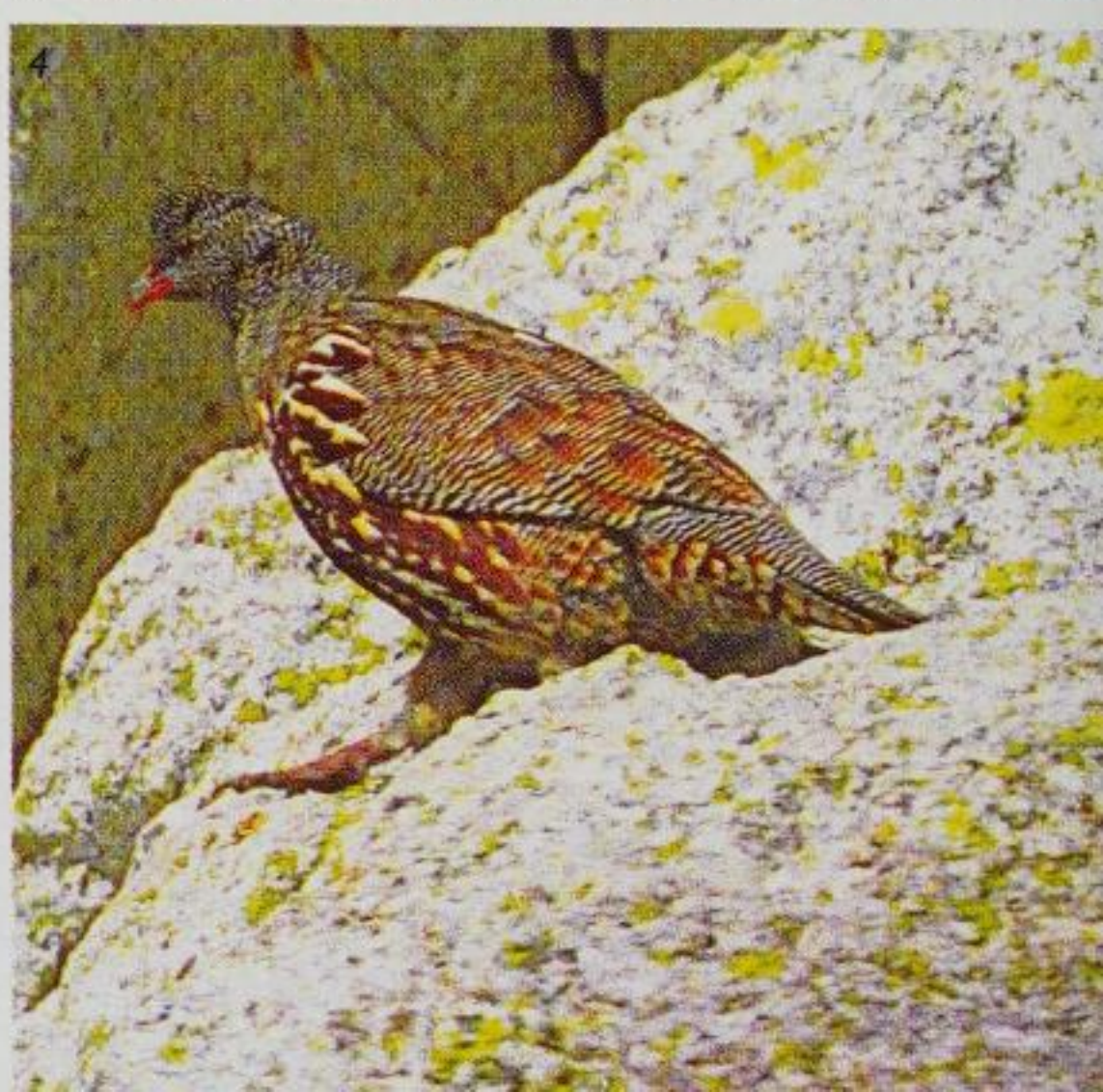


Hill Partridges breed in forests between1500 and 4000m.

Though not always easily spotted, the **Hill Partridge** (28cm) is a common resident in Himalayan temperate forests. It has a fine black and chestnut head pattern and large black dots on its flanks. Its call is a 'bob-white' and a mournful whistle. The **Chukar** (38cm) is evenly light brown with broad dark bars on the flanks, a yellow, black-bordered throat and red legs and bill. Calls include 'chukachukachukachuka'. The uncommon but tame **Snow Partridge** (38cm) is narrowly barred with black apart from the breast and belly that show broad chestnut streaks. The **Himalayan Snowcock** (72cm) is a large, fat bird of the high Himlaya. It is grey, streaked with black and buff. The head is lighter, with chestnut on head and throat. Its call is a 'curlee-wihi' and an accelerating 'kuk-kuk-kuk' etc. The rarer **Tibetan Snowcock** (51cm, no photo) of the Trans-Himalaya lacks chestnut on the head and is whiter on the flanks with broader, black lining.

2 Chukars inhabit barren slopes of the high NW Himalaya.
3 Himalayan Snowcocks live above the treeline in the NW Himalaya.
4 Snow Partridges are confined to the highest slopes of the NW Himalaya.





Geese

Bar-headed Geese winter on farmland and extensive wetlands in most of India apart from the central region. Breed in Ladakh.

Large migratory wetland birds that arrive in large flocks from areas to the north to feed, mainly through grazing, in and around the many wetlands of the subcontinent.

The **Bar-headed Goose** (82cm) of the Tibetan Plateau is a handsome grey goose with several distinctive black bars on the white head. Legs and bill are yellow. The **Greylag Goose** (81cm) is overall brown with light forewings and pinkish bill and legs. The **Ruddy Shelduck** (66cm) is an attractive deep orange-brown with black bill, black back and wing tips, white forewings and green speculum. The **Comb Duck** (76cm) is white below with speckled head, glossy black upperparts and a large knob on the bill of the male.

2 Greylag Geese are also found in smaller swamps in N India.
3 Ruddy Shelduck winter on lakes and rivers in most of India apart from C and S.
4 Comb Duck are residents and breed in trees near jheels and marshes in parts of NW and W India.

Ducks

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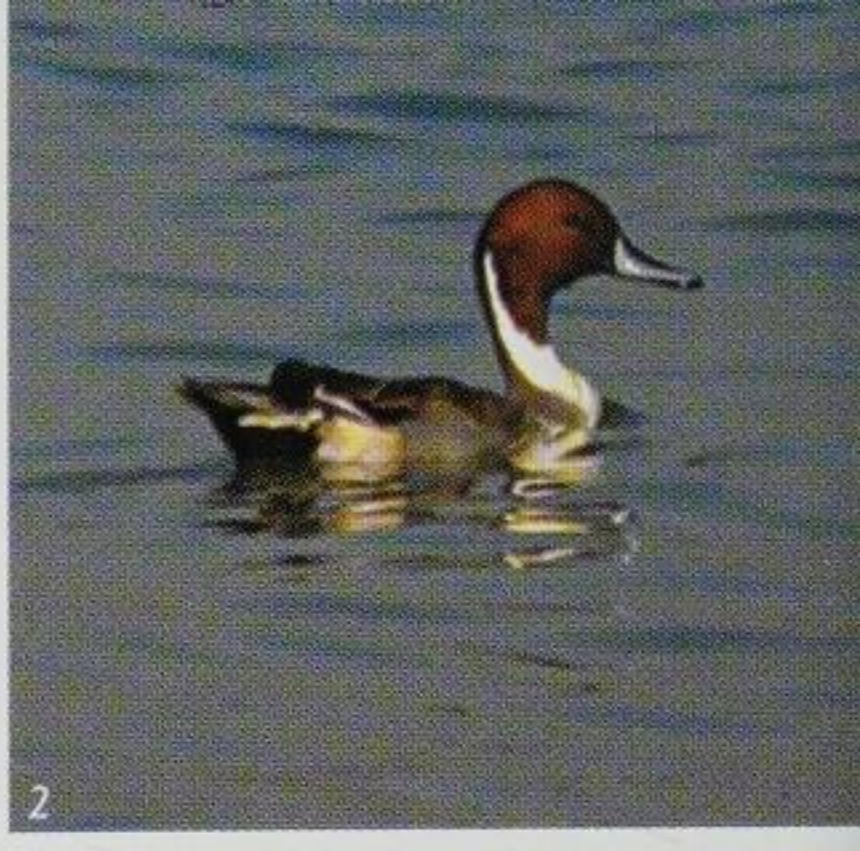
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1 Male and female Northern Shoveler.
2 Male Northern Pintail.
3 Female Northern Pintail.
4 Male and female Eurasian Wigeon.
5 Male and female Gadwall.
6 Male Garganey.
7 Male Common Teal.
8 Female Common Teal.
9 Cotton Pygmy Goose.
10 Male and Female Common Pochard.
11 Male and female Red-crested Pochard.
12 Male Tufted Duck.
13 Female Tufted Duck.
14 Ferruginous Pochard.

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Water birds with webbed feet and flat, rounded bills that are equipped with comb-like lamellae to strain food particles out of the water. The females of the various species have confusingly similar brown plumages with darker markings. Most wintering ducks arrive in India in autumn when they are in eclipse phase and at this time the males look very much like the females.

11

The following six dabbling ducks winter throughout India but most are not found in parts of C and E India, and Gadwalls are also absent from the south. The male of the **Northern Shoveler** (51cm) is clearly identifiable with its chestnut flanks and shiny dark green head. It is the only duck with a large spatulate bill and this is the best identification feature for females and males in eclipse plumage. This species flies up with wings making a deep, loud drone. **Northern Pintails** (56-74cm) are easily identified by the long tail and chocolate-brown head. Females are brown and also clearly appear long-tailed and long-necked compared to other dabbling ducks. **Eurasian Wigeons** (49cm) have pointed tails as well but considerably shorter than the tails of male pintails. While male wigeons are distinctive, the females are identified by their short-looking bodies and reddish-brown flanks. **Gadwalls** (51cm) appear long-bodied. Males are grey with black sterns. Females are separated by their white speculums and orange bills. Male **Garganeys** (41cm) are easily recognised by the broad, white supercilium, and the combination of a brown head and chest with grey flanks. Females have an eye-stripe. Their purring call can be helpful in identification. In flight, the grey forewings are diagnostic. The **Common Teal** (38cm) is one of the smallest ducks. Males are grey with yellow under the tail. The head is chestnut with a green band. Females lack particular markings. Note the high 'prii' call. The **Marbled Duck** (48cm, no photo) is identified by the dark eye-patch and spots on the plumage. It is rare in NW India. The **Cotton Pygmy Goose** (33cm) is an easily identified resident of most of India apart from parts of the NE and far NW. Diving ducks include the following: **Common Pochard** (48cm) males are characteristic; the grey-backed female has a brown head with light patches. They winter in NW, N, W, far NE and SE India. The male **Red-crested Pochard** (54cm) is like a large Common Pochard but with white flanks and red bill. The female has a diagnostic white throat. They winter in C, NW, W, N, and NE India. **Tufted Duck** (43cm) are smaller. Males have white flanks and dark purple, crested heads while females are dark brown with light flanks. They winter in NW, W, C and far NE and SE India. **Ferruginous Pochards** (41cm) are entirely chestnut-brown with white undertails. They winter in parts of NW, C and W India.

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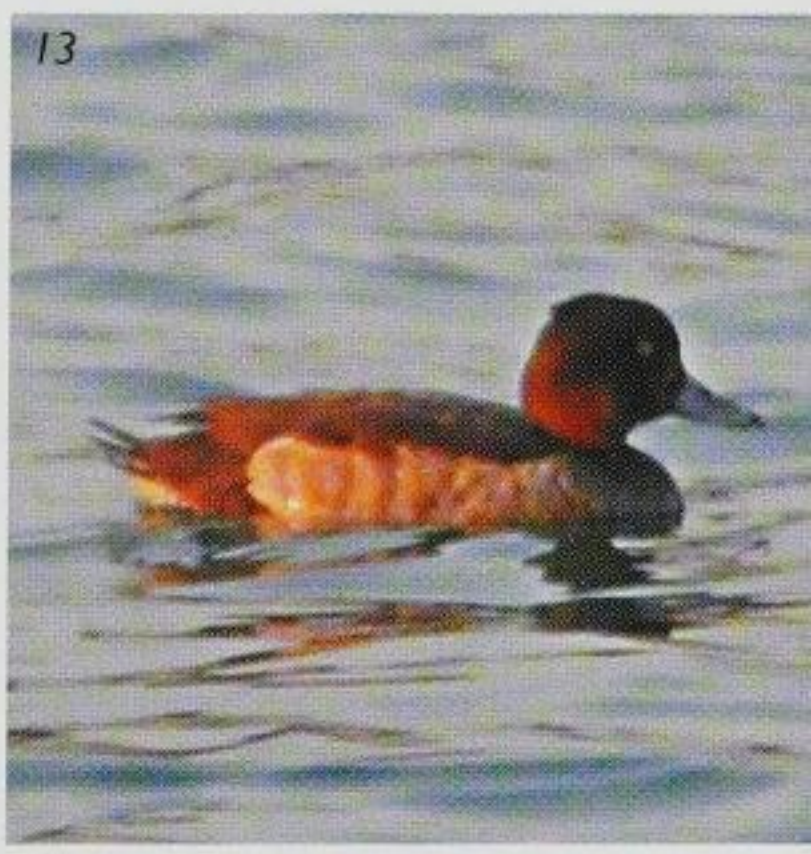
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Spot-billed Ducks breed and winter in jheels, marshes, reservoirs and rivers in much of India apart from parts of E and C.

The **Spot-billed Duck** (61cm), a bulky dabbling duck, is quite light with dark scalloping. Apart from a dark crown it has a black vent and a yellow-tipped bill. The **Mallard** (61cm) is similarly sized. The male plumage is obvious and the female looks like other female dabbling ducks, but note the large size with a rather long neck and yellow bill. The **Common Merganser** (66cm) is another large duck but with a long, fine bill. The male is white with black lines over the back. It also has dark wing tips and blackish-green head. Females are grey with reddish-brown crested head and white mirrors in the wings. The **Lesser Whistling Duck** (42cm) is a yellowish-brown duck with chestnut patches on forewing and tail. The back is darker with light fringes to the feathers.

2 Mallards winter in similar habitats in N and C India.
3 Common Mergansers breed along streams in the Himalaya and winter in the foothills.
4 Lesser Whistling Duck breed in trees besides lakes and ponds with good vegetation in most of India except parts of NW, C and S.

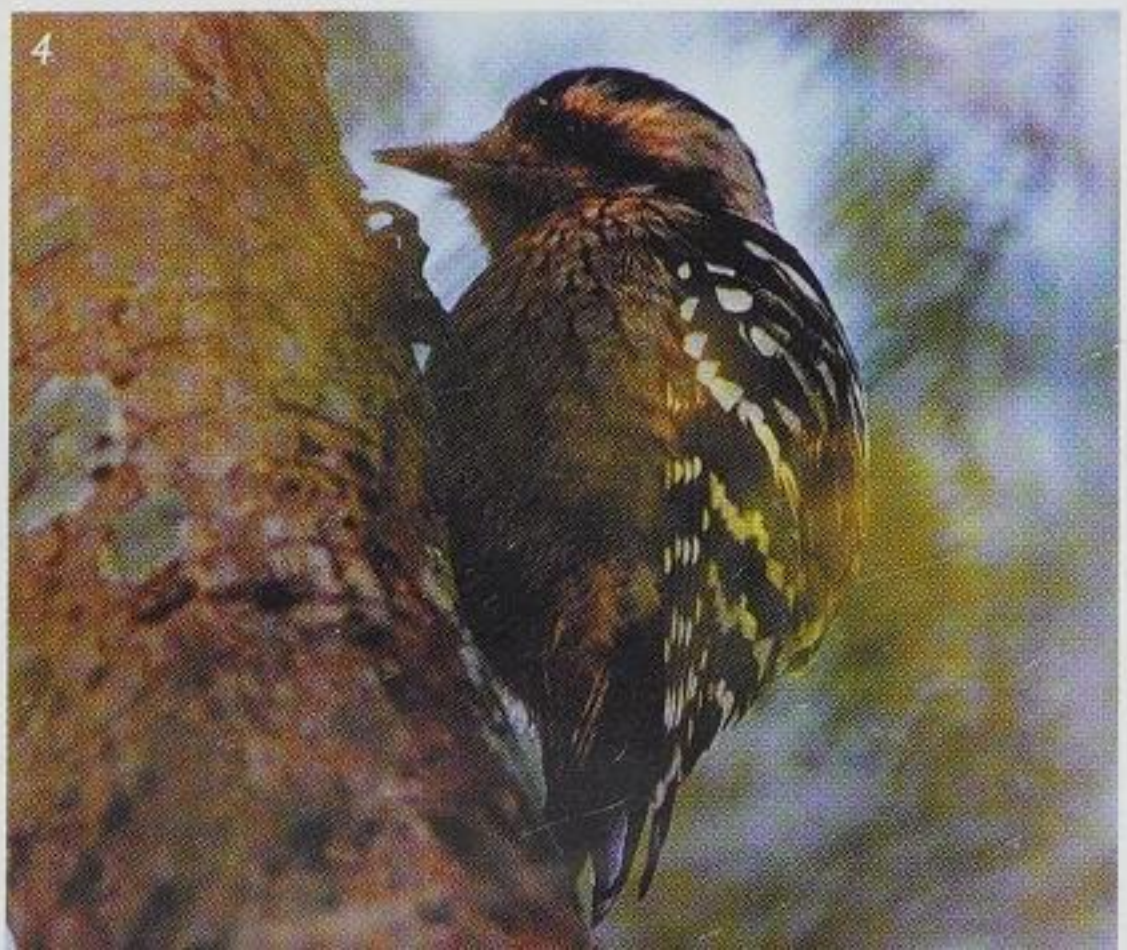
Woodpeckers

Grey-headed Woodpeckers breed between 300 and 2500m all along the Himalayas.

Characteristic forest birds specialised in climbing trees, woodpeckers chisel out their own nesting holes with their strong bills. Their stiff tails help them to keep a grip on tree trunks while their long tongues are essential in retrieving insects burrowing in the wood.

The **Grey-headed Woodpecker** (32cm) is a widely distributed, commonplace woodpecker of the Himalaya. It is green with a red crown (black in female) and black nape. As its name suggests, the head is grey. The **Scaly-bellied Woodpecker** (35cm) is green with a red (male) or black (female) crown. Its call is a descending 'kee-aw'. The underparts are scaled but the throat and upper breast are unmarked, separating it from the smaller **Streak-throated Woodpecker** (29cm), which shows streaks on the throat and upper breast. The tiny **Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker** (14cm) has a dark grey crown with red on the back of the head in the male in western populations. The buff underparts are streaked with dark. Call: 'tirrrrrirrirrri'. The very similar **Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker** (13cm, no photo) of India's lowlands is browner, almost unstreaked below and with a red eye-ring.

2 Scaly-bellied Woodpeckers breed between 2000 and 3500m and winter in the foothills of the Himalaya.
3 Streak-throated Woodpeckers inhabit the well-forested areas of the Indian plains.
4 Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpeckers live in the subtropical forests of the Himalayan foothills.



A colourful resident of the Himalaya is the **Greater Yellownape** (33cm). It is green-brown with a grey belly and a crest that ends in yellow, this colour extending down the nape. Note also the black-and-white streaks on the upper breast and, in the male, the yellow throat. The **Lesser Yellownape** (27cm) has barred underparts and a yellow crest on the back of the head. Males show red above and behind the eye and as a moustachial stripe while in females it is confined to a small patch behind the eye. **Speckled Piculets** (10cm) are tiny woodpeckers that give themselves away with their high 'tit-tit-tit' calls. **Rufous Woodpeckers** (25cm) are entirely red-brown with narrow black barring on the upperparts. The **Great Slaty Woodpecker** (51cm, no photo) is a huge, entirely grey woodpecker found in the C and E Himalaya. In the W and E Ghats look for the black, red-crowned **White-bellied Woodpecke**r (48cm, no photo). It also has a white rump and under-belly.

1 Greater Yellownapes live in similar habitat in the C and E Himalaya.
2 Lesser Yellownapes breed in forests up to 2000m in the Himalaya, W and E Ghats.
3 Speckled Piculets breed in the Himalayan foothills up to 2000m.
4 RufousWoodpeckers inhabit moist-deciduous forests up to 1600m in the Himalaya and parts of NE, C and SW.

The **Brown-fronted Woodpecker** (20cm) is a common woodpecker of the Himalaya. The male has a red hind-crown sharply demarcated from the yellow-buff crown. The female's entire crown is buff. The undertail is typically light red while the back is black, barred with white. Call: 'cheek' and 'trrrrr'. On the Indian plains it is replaced by the **Yellow-crowned Woodpecker** (18cm), which differs in that the back is spotted white instead of barred. Also, the red on the back of the crown extends a bit further forwards. Call: 'chik'. **Fulvous-breasted Woodpeckers** (19cm) look like Brown-fronted Woodpeckers but have a fully red crown while females have black crowns. This, along with the red undertail, distinguishes them from the pygmy woodpeckers. The **Himalayan Woodpecker** (25cm) shows a red crown in males and black in females. The back is black with two large white areas. Calls: 'kit' and a rattle. The **Rufous-bellied Woodpecker** (20cm) has rufous underparts. The neck and crown are fully red in the male.

1 Brown-fronted Woodpeckers inhabit the temperate forests of the Himalaya.
2 Yellow-crowned Woodpeckers are found in all types of forest, gardens and groves in most of India, apart from parts of NW, C and S.
3 Fulvous-breasted Woodpeckers live in the low Himalayan foothills up to 2000m.
4 Himalayan Woodpeckers breed from 1500m to the treeline.
5 Rufous-bellied Woodpeckers inhabit Himalayan forests.

Eurasian Wrynecks breed in Ladakh and winter all over India, augmented by visitors from C Asia.

Eurasian Wrynecks (19cm) are not real woodpeckers and spend most time on the ground. They quietly hang out around fields and wetlands. The **Heart-spotted Woodpecker** (16cm) is unmistakable. The **Black-rumped Flameback** (29cm) is the commonest of the several species of woodpeckers with golden backs. White on the face and belly, it has black over the throat and breast, hind-neck and shoulders. The call is a chattering 'ki-ki-ki-ki-kyirrrrrrrr'. The larger **Greater Flameback** (33cm) is similar but with a red rump and white throat. Note also the black of the face extending to the upper back. It has a white patch on the hind-neck which is missing in the otherwise very similar **Himalayan Flameback** (31cm, no photo) which has a narrower black line through the eye, below which there is white bordered by a black moustachial line. The **Common Flameback** (28cm, no photo) of the SW is almost identical.

2 Heart-spotted Woodpeckers breed in W Ghats forests.
3 Black-rumped Flamebacks are found in open woodland throughout the subcontinent.
4 Greater Flamebacks - here a male - are distributed in the low C and E Himalaya, E India and the W Ghats.
5 Female Greater Flameback.

Barbets

Great Barbets inhabit Himalayan forests.

Monotonously repeated calls are the first giveaway for these stubby, thick-necked birds that often keep to the canopy of trees. Equipped with heavy bills, barbets open seeds and fruits and create nesting holes in tree trunks and branches.

The **Great Barbet** (33cm) of the Himalaya is India's largest barbet, with conspicuous yellow bill, blue-grey head, brown shoulders, red vent and green upperparts. Its calls are a loud, incessant 'treuuu' and 'ko'. The **Brown-headed Barbet** (27cm) has an all-India distribution. It looks similar to the **Lineated Barbet** (28cm) which has broader light streaking on the brown head with a yellow eye-patch and bill, that are orange in the Brown-headed. The call of the Lineated is a 'potur', similar to but softer than that of the Brown-headed. The **Coppersmith Barbet** (17cm) is the smallest barbet. It is green with a black, yellow and red face. Calls repetitive, a gentle 'wok-wok-wok-wok' etc.

2 Lineated Barbets occur in the Himalaya and the NE.
3 Coppersmith Barbets are found in all types of wooded areas and sizeable village trees throughout the subcontinent.
4 Brown-headed Barbets live in forests, gardens and groves all over India.

White-cheeked Barbets breed in the hills of SW India.

The **White-cheeked Barbet** (23cm) has a brown head with white patches above and below the eye. The call is a higher version of that of the Brown-headed Barbet. The **Blue-throated Barbet** (23cm) has a blue face and chin with red crown. It calls 'mubarrek'. The **Crimson-fronted Barbet** (17cm) emits calls similar to the Coppersmith's and is bright red on the crown, face and throat.

2 Blue-throated Barbets are found in the Himalaya up to 2000m.
3 Crimson-fronted Barbets are resident in the W Ghats.
4 Pied Kingfishers (see p 47) are often seen fishing in pairs or small groups throughout India.
5 Black-capped Kingfishers (see p 47) prefer salt and brackish water and occur along much of India's coast.

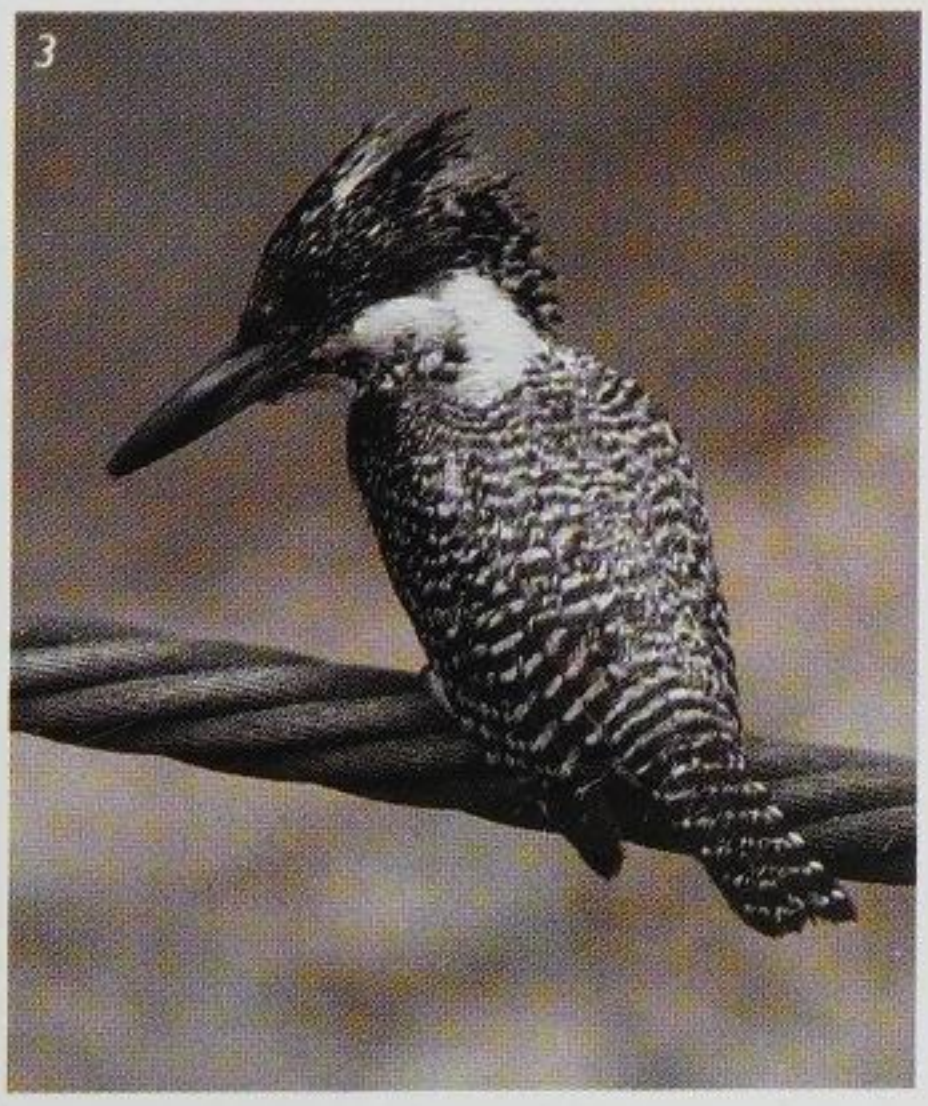
Kingfishers

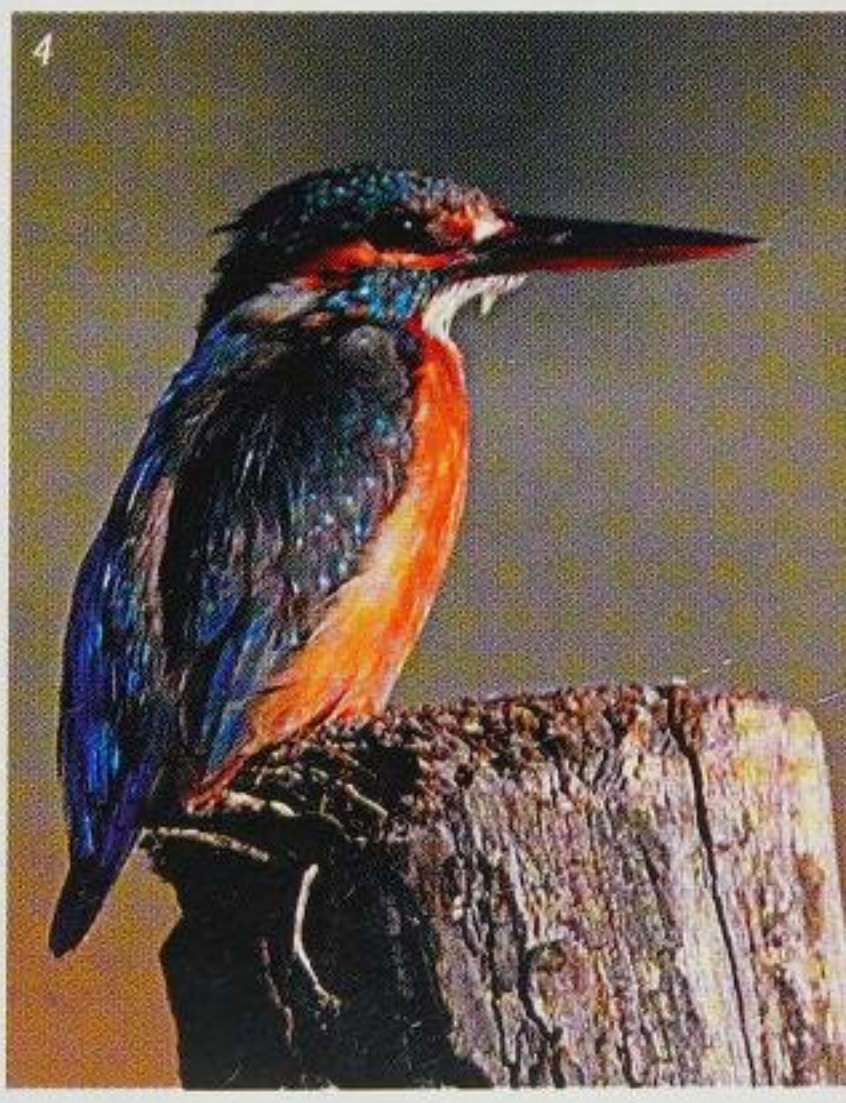
White-throated Kingfishers visit all types of water but also feed in fields quite distant from any water.

The subcontinent is home to a wealth of colourful kingfishers with large, dagger-like bills used to catch fish, insects and small mammals. Breeding is conducted in holes, mostly in steep banks.

The **White-throated Kingfisher** (28cm) is India's commonest and most widespread kingfisher. Clad in a distinctive plumage, it has a chattering call resembling a Black-rumped Flameback (see p 44). The **Stork-billed Kingfisher** (38cm) is India's largest kingfisher, easily identified by its very heavy, large bill. The **Pied Kingfisher** (31cm, see p 46) is the only black-and-white kingfisher of the plains. Call: 'chirrek'. The **Crested Kingfisher** (41cm) of the Himalaya is similar but much larger, with a more extensive crest and barred upperparts. It calls a 'whit, whit'. The **Common Kingfisher** (16cm) is not the commonest kingfisher everywhere but wherever it occurs it gives its presence away by its high piercing call. The **Black-capped Kingfisher** (30cm, see p 46) looks like a White-throated Kingfisher but note the black head, white collar and darker blue back.

2 Stork-billed Kingfishers prefer lakes and streams in wooded country throughout India, apart from the NW.
3 Crested Kingfishers are solitary birds of mountain streams and sometimes surprisingly small brooks in the lower Himalaya.
4 Common Kingfishers are widely distributed in the subcontinent.





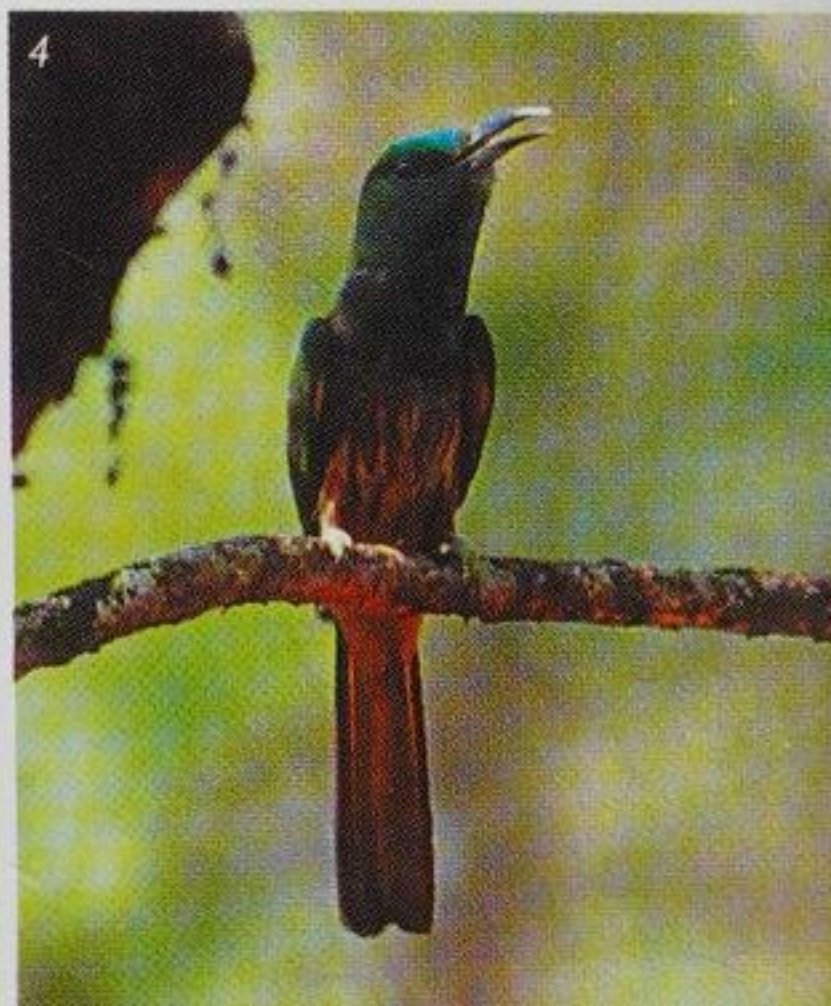
Bee-eaters

Green Bee-eaters are all-India residents of open wooded and cultivated areas.

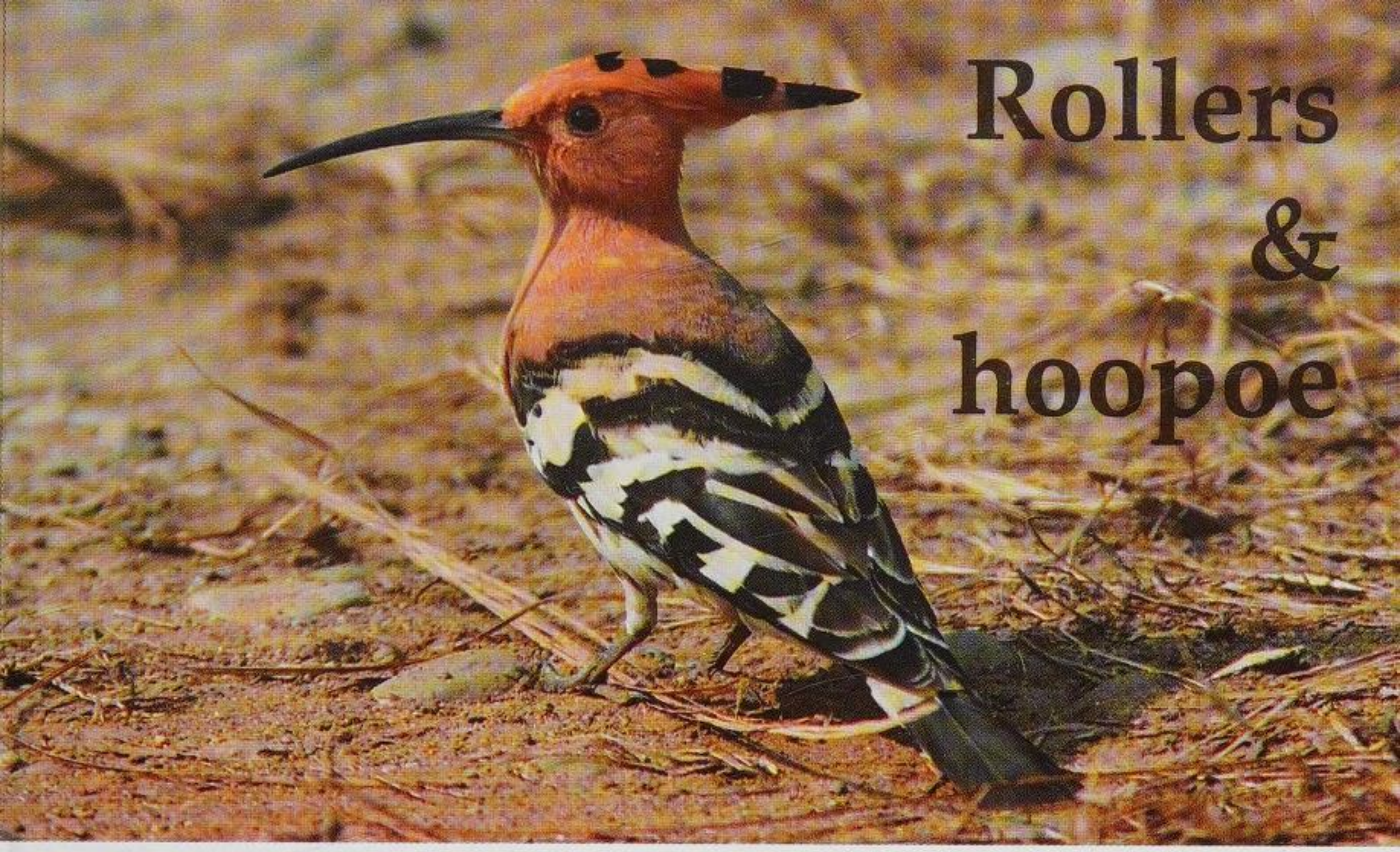
Elegant and colourful, bee-eaters hunt on the wing, conducting sallies from exposed perches. They breed in tunnels in steep banks.

The **Green Bee-eater** (21cm) is India's smallest bee-eater. It is green but with a chestnut crown, a black band across the eye and a bluish wash to the throat. Note the extended tail feathers. The call is a ringing 'tree-tree'. The **Chestnut-headed Bee-eater** (21cm) looks similar but has more extensive chestnut on the crown, neck and upper back. The throat is yellow and it has a blunt tail. The **Blue-tailed Bee-eater** (30cm) is a large, green bee-eater with long extended tail feathers. It shows chestnut on the throat while the tail and wings are blue. The very similar **Blue-cheecked Bee-eater** (30cm, no photo) is distinguished by the absence of blue on the rump and tail. Summers in the NW. The large **Blue-bearded Bee-eater** (34cm) of the hills is green with blue forehead, throat and breast.

2 Chestnut-headed Bee-eaters are found in forest near water along the Himalaya and in the S.
3 Blue-tailed Bee-eaters hawk over forests and lakes. They summer in the N and winter in the S.
4 Blue-bearded Bee-eaters breed in the hill forests of the W and E Ghats and the C and E Himalaya.



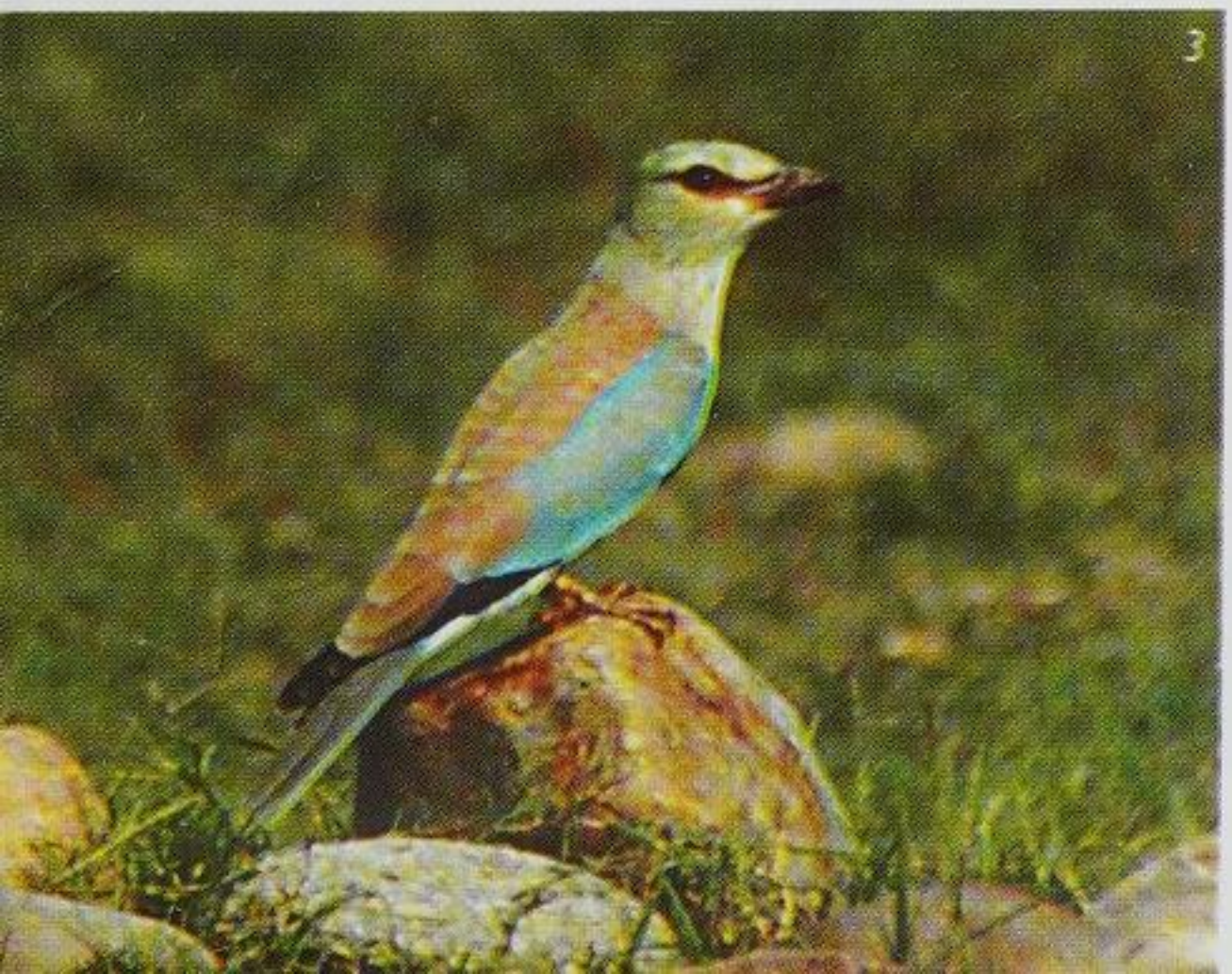
Rollers & hoopoe



Common Hoopoes are found in gardens, open forests and cultivated areas.

Rollers are medium-sized birds of open forest and cultivation with strong bills used to seize insects, lizards and mice. Hoopoes breed in hollow trees in open wooded country and feed on insects.

The **Common Hoopoe** (31cm) is a distinctive bird with a large crest and down-curved bill. The call is a 'hoe-poe-poe'. The **Indian Roller** (31cm) keeps its most luminous feathers concealed till it flies, metallic blue and light blue bands flashing from its wings. Face and neck are streaked purple. It has an acrobatic, 'rolling' display flight during the breeding season. The **European Roller** (31cm) is similar but with a blue face and underparts. The **Dollarbird** (31cm) is a dark purple bird with a striking red bill. In flight the wings are dark blue with light oval patches. Like other rollers it emits harsh calls.



2 Indian Rollers thrive in similar habitats throughout India up to 1500 in the Himalaya.
3 European Rollers prefer drier, more open areas and are seen on migration in the NW.
4 Dollarbirds are seen in woods and along forest edges in the W Ghats and the C and E.

Hornbills

Indian Grey Hornbills inhabit all types of wooded areas including parks, gardens and even roadside trees.

Large forest birds with huge bills that in most species develop a swelling on top called a casque. Peculiarly the females are cemented into their nesting holes in trees with mud while sitting on their eggs and raising their young. During this period, the male feeds the female through a small aperture. The diet consists of fruit augmented occasionally by small animals.

The **Indian Grey Hornbill** (61cm) is commonly seen throughout India and easily identified. The **Malabar Grey Hornbill** (59cm) is similar except that the bill is yellow instead of grey-brown, and has no casque. The black-and-white **Oriental Pied Hornbill** (89cm) is quite a bit larger with a yellow bill and casque; the very similar **Malabar Pied Hornbill** (92cm) is distinguished by the blue rather than white patch around the eye (male), white sides to the whole tail instead of only the tip, and more black on the casque than in the Oriental Pied. The **Great Hornbill** (130cm) is enormous with a yellow line through the wings and a white tail marked with one black band.

2 Malabar Grey Hornbills reside in the W Ghats.
3 Malabar Pied Hornbills occur in the W and E Ghats.
4 Oriental Pied Hornbills live in dense forests and groves in the Himalaya and the E.
5 Great Hornbills occur in forests of the W Ghats and the C and E Himalaya.

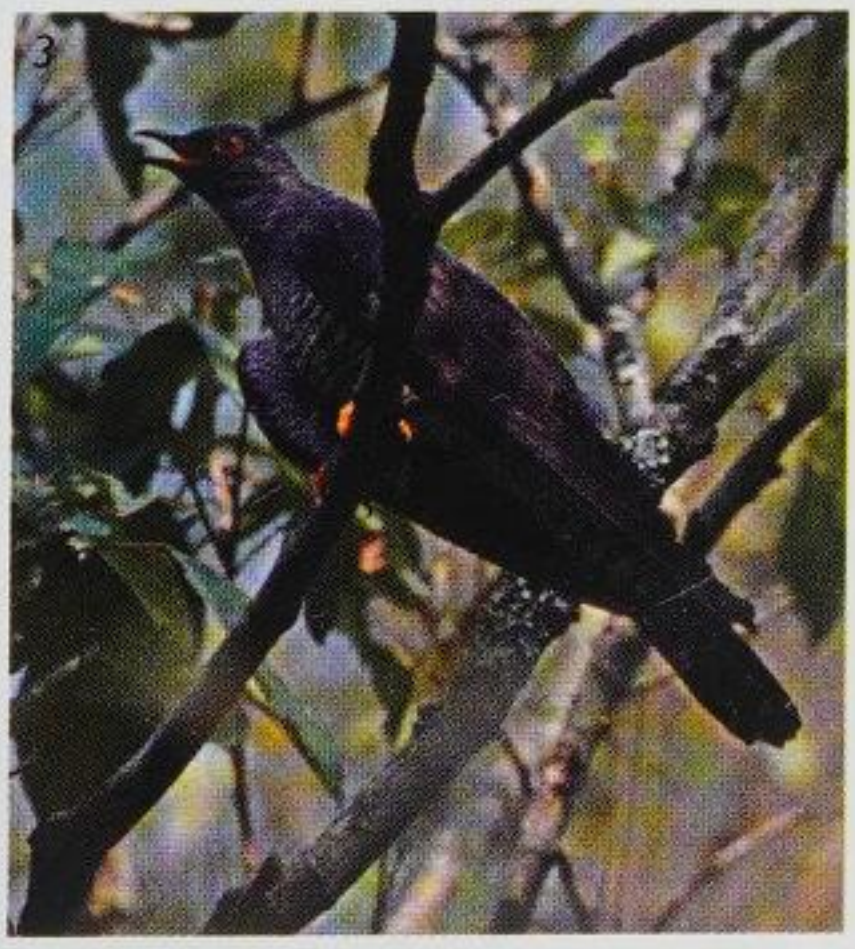
Cuckoos

Asian Koels are all-India residents that call from large trees in gardens, parks and woodland.

Medium-sized birds with long, graduated tails. They feed on insects and lay their eggs in nests of birds often much smaller than themselves. After having hatched, the cuckoo chick throws out the original eggs of its foster parents who then raise the young cuckoo.

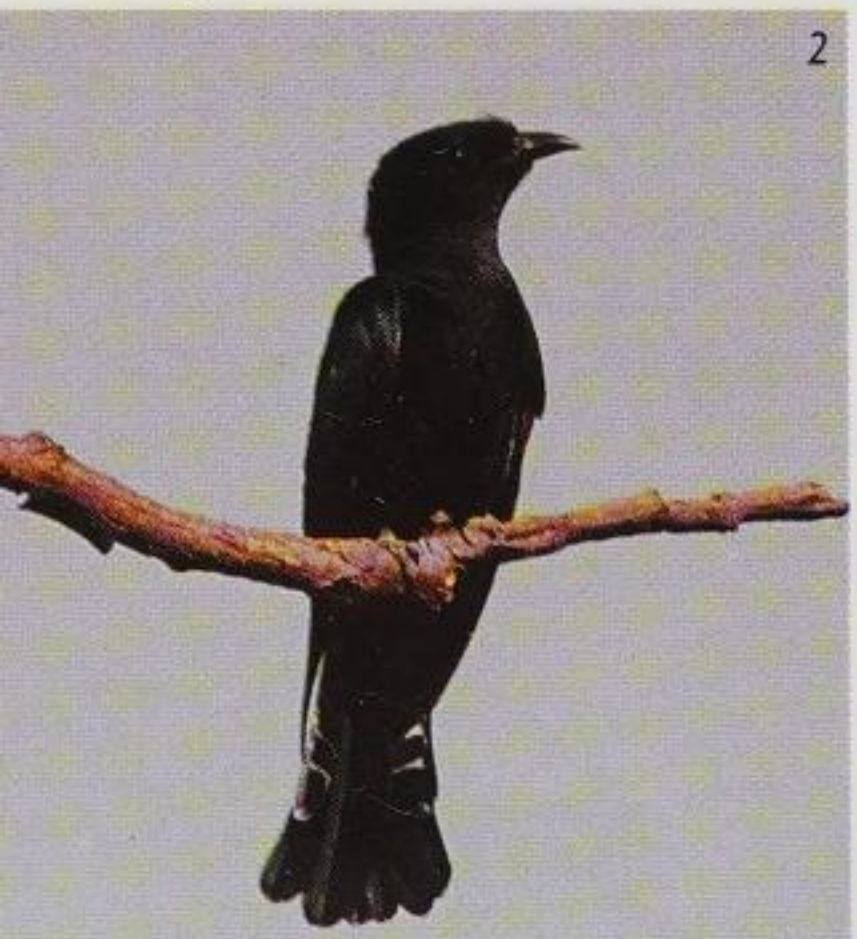
The **Asian Koel** (43cm) or *koyal* enjoys legendary status in India. The male is entirely black with a red eye, the female brown stippled with white (see photo p 52). It is more elongated than the crows (p 102) and has a long tail. Call: a loud 'koyal' and a ringing 'kru-kruu-kruu-kruu'. Four near-identical grey cuckoos of wooded country have grey-white, barred bellies and white-tipped, graduated tails. Also note the yellow eye-ring in each species. They are best identified by their calls: The **Indian Cuckoo** (33cm) calls 'empty bottle'. The **Eurasian Cuckoo** (33cm, photo also on p 52) calls 'cuckoo'. The **Oriental Cuckoo** (31cm, no photo) of the Himalaya has a deep 'u-poo-poo-poo' call, a bit like a hoopoe (see p 49). The smaller **Lesser Cuckoo** (26cm, no photo) of the Himalaya makes a rushed irregular sequence of five-six notes. The **Grey-bellied Cuckoo** (23cm) is small, black-billed and grey. Its belly is not barred like the species above, but the under-belly is white. Its call is a high, mournful 'pieeer'.

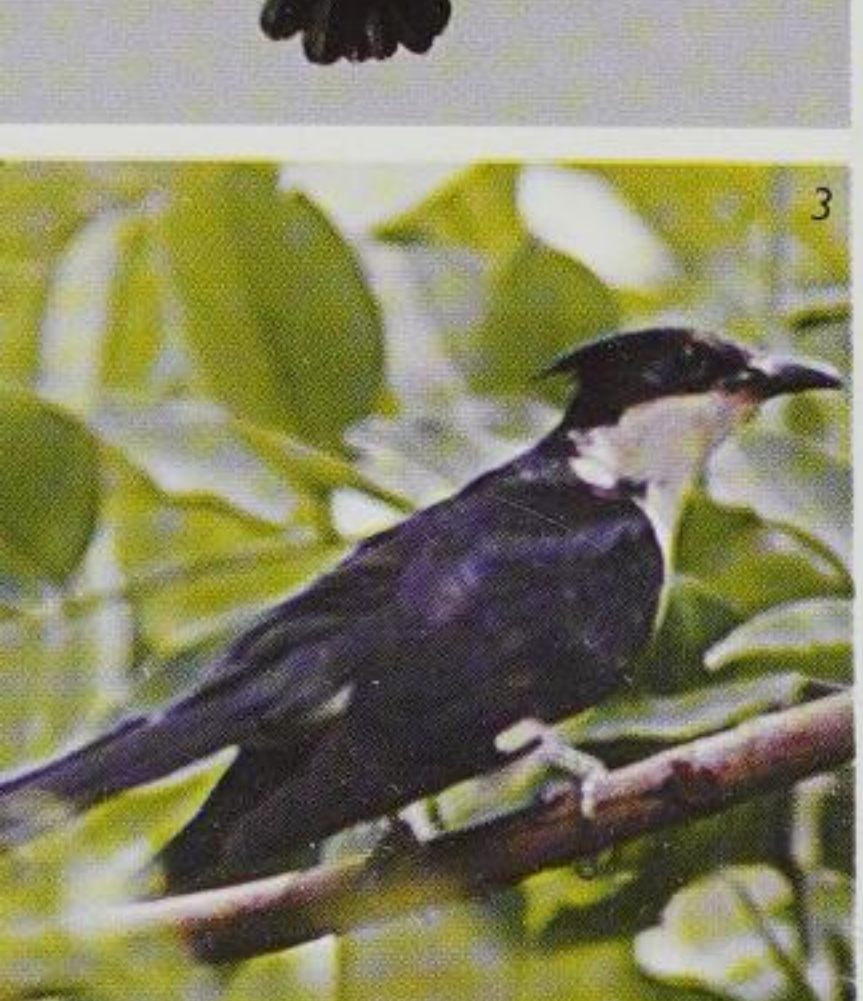
2 Eurasian Cuckoos breed in the Himalaya and are also seen in alpine meadows.
3 Indian Cuckoos are found in much of India apart from the W.
4 Grey-bellied Cuckoos live in wooded areas across the whole of India.

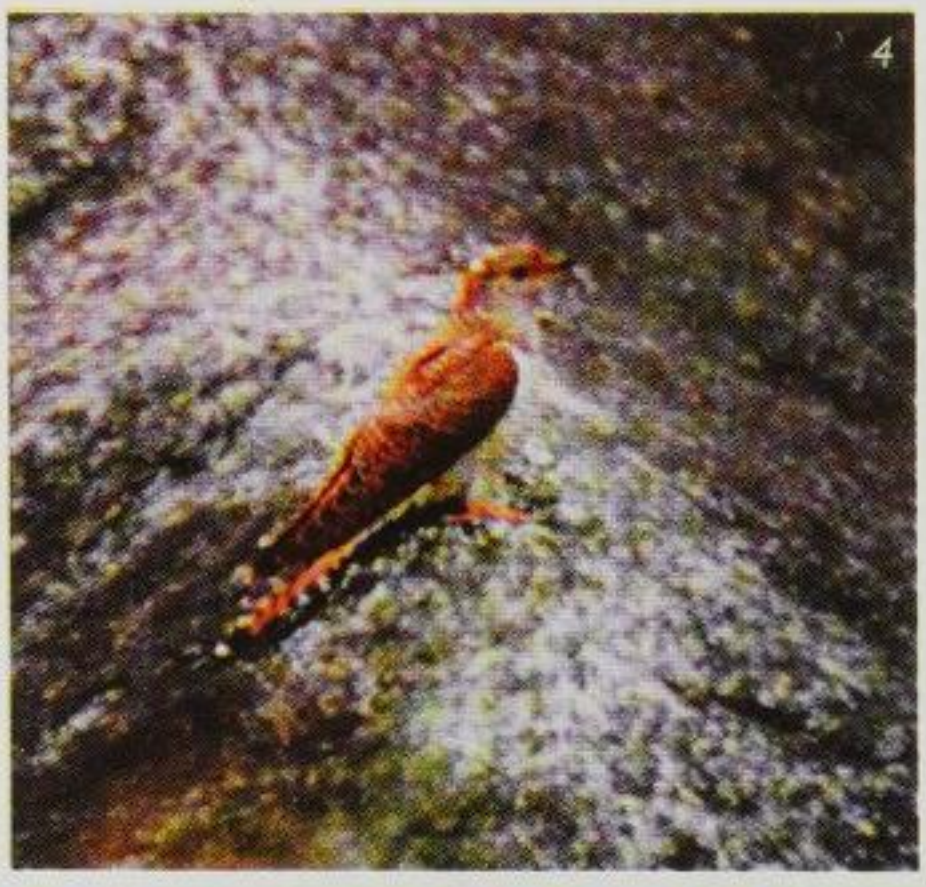


Greater Coucals inhabit forest edges and marshland in most of the subcontinent.

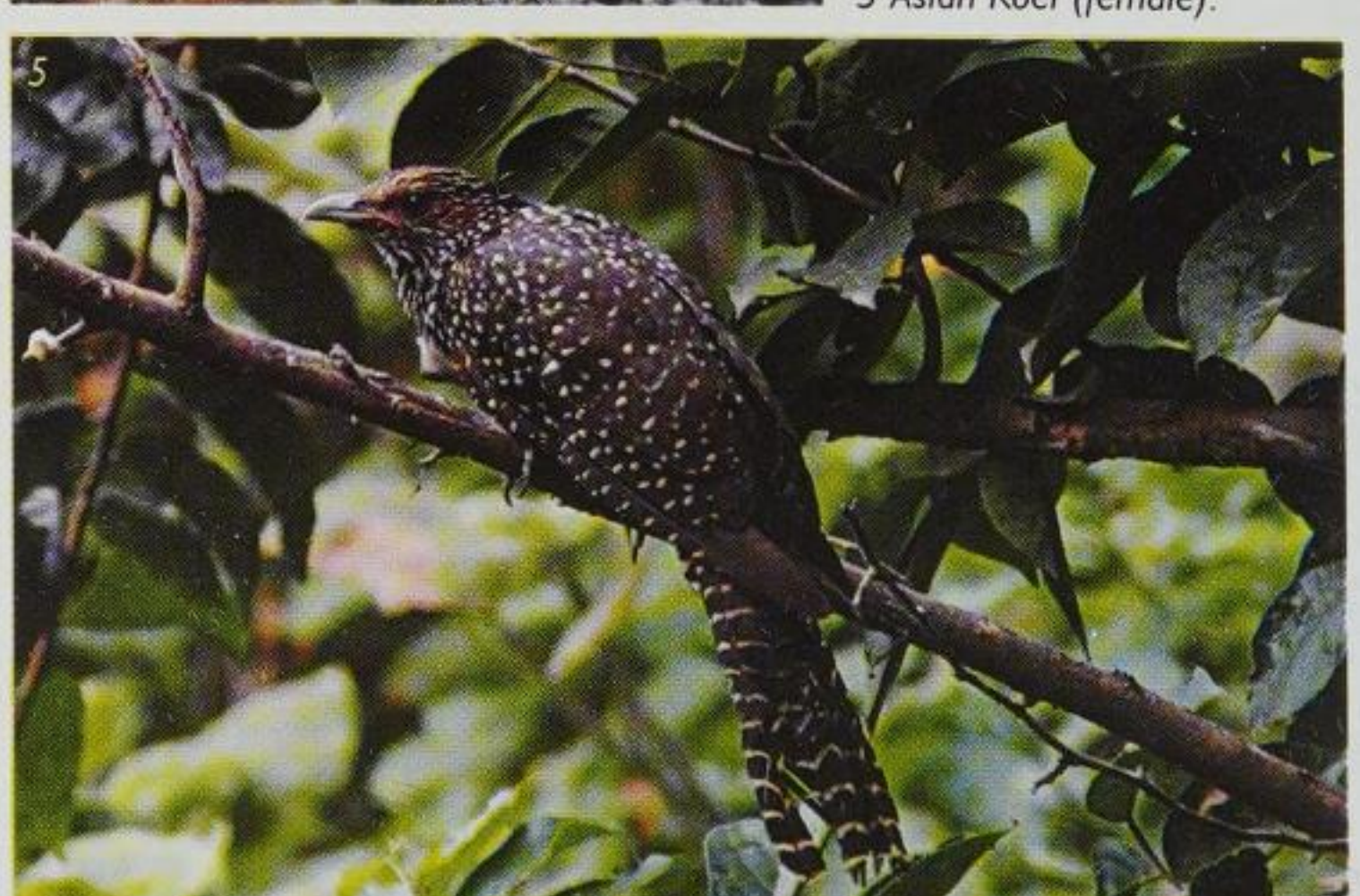
The **Greater Coucal** (48cm) is related to cuckoos but makes its own nest. It is often seen perched or lifting its black body out of cover with strong beats of the chestnut wings. Its call is a loud and deep, 'woep woep woep'. **Drongo Cuckoos** are very similar to drongos (see p 112) but note the down-curved bill and the unique, ascending 'pi-pi-pi-pi-pi' call. The **Pied Cuckoo** (31cm) is the only crested cuckoo. White below and black above, it has a white wing-patch. Calls: 'pi-uw', 'piu-piu'. The **Banded Bay Cuckoo** (24cm, no photo) occurs in S and C India and C and E Himalay. It looks like a brown phase of the Eurasian Cuckoo (see p 51) but has a broad light - though barred - supercilium and a dark band behind the eye.







2 Drongo Cuckoos occur in well-wooded country in the low Himalaya and the S.
3 Pied Cuckoos reside in S India, spreading N during the summer rains to light forest and gardens in much of India.
4 Eurasian Cuckoo (brown phase, see p 51).
5 Asian Koel (female).

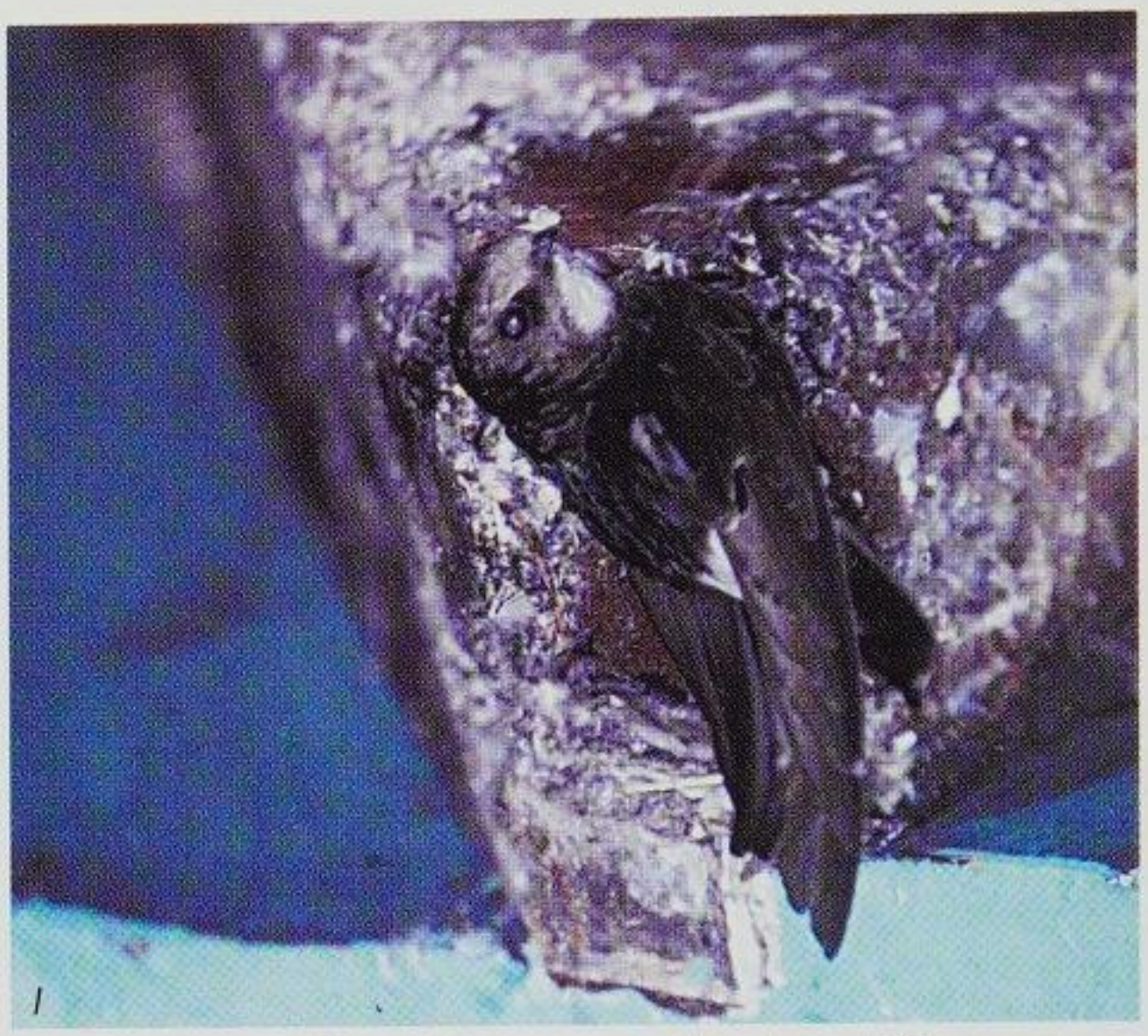


Blue-faced Malcohas are residents in scrub and undergrowth in S India.

The **Blue-faced Malcoha** (39cm) is a large, long-tailed cuckoo. It is fairly shy but will climb up through a bush and expose itself. The dark, bluish-green upperparts and the blue eye-ring are in contrast to the duller brown **Sirkeer Malcoha** (43cm) with its red-and-yellow bill. Both have long tails that are largely white below. The **Common Hawk Cuckoo** (34cm) or 'brain fever bird' is well-known throughout India because of its fanatical 'brain-fever' call. It has some resemblance to a Shikra (p 91), with orange breast barring, but observe the shape of the bird and fine, down-curved bill. The **Large Hawk Cuckoo** (38cm) of the Himalaya has a similar look and call but is darker with black barring on the belly.

2 Sirkeer Malcohas occur throughout India in modest numbers, breeding in dry woods and scrub.
3 Common Hawk Cuckoos are seen in forests, gardens and parks across most of India.
4 Large Hawk Cuckoos occur in Himalayan forests.

Swifts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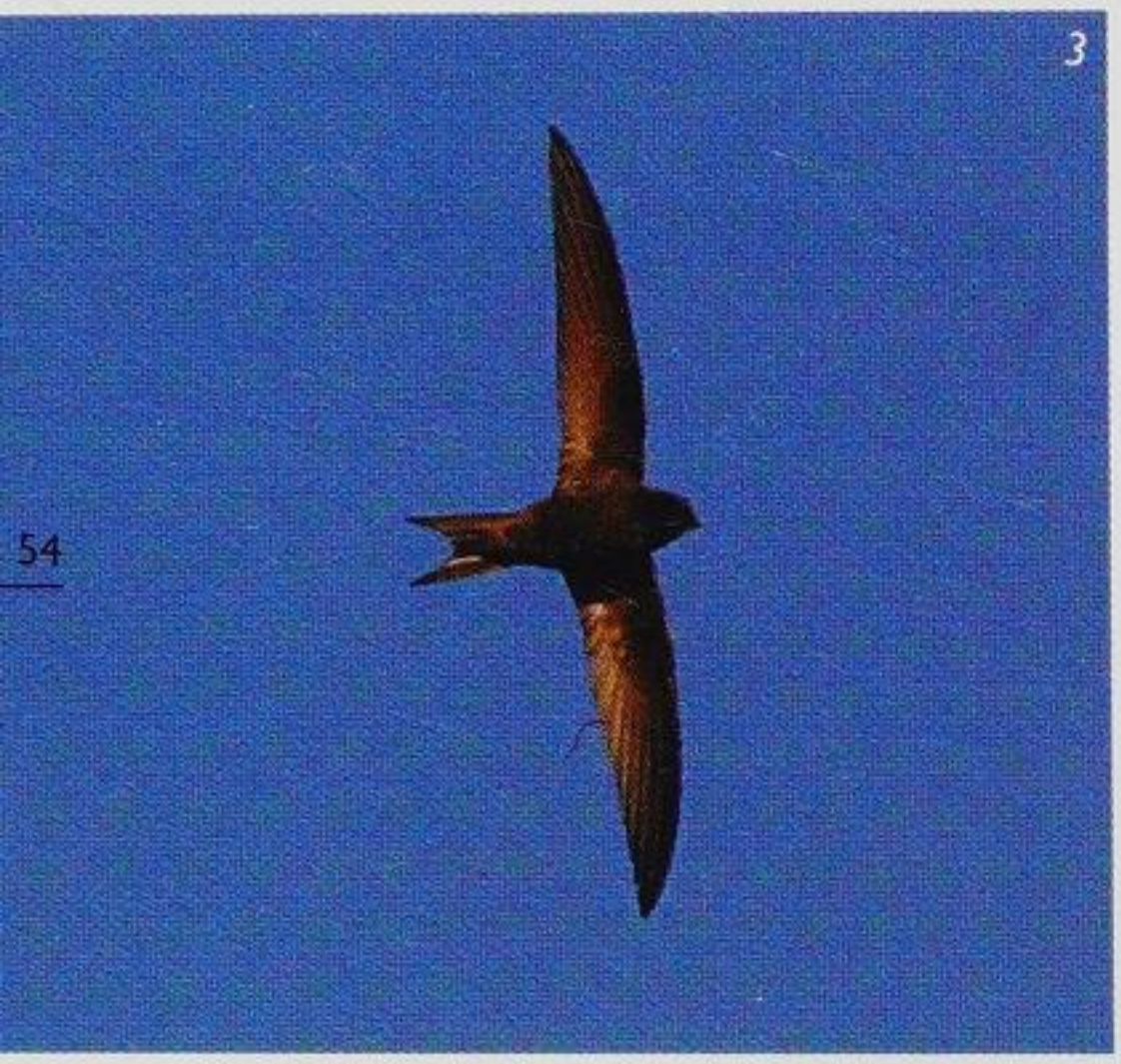
House Swift on nest under the roof of a veranda

2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Swifts are epic flyers that are reputed to continue to fly even while asleep. Some species travel many hundreds of kilometres daily in order to hawk insects over lakes and mountain ridges. Most have trilling calls.

House Swifts (15cm) are found throughout the subcontinent hawking in large troupes over water and cultivation. This smallish swift has a white rump and a shorter tail compared to the long, forked tail of the Fork-tailed Swift, which also has a white rump (see below). The tiny **Indian Swiftlet** (12cm, no photo) is dull-brown and a shade lighter on the underparts, identical to the **Himalayan Swiftlet** (14cm) except for the latter having a light rump that contrasts with the darker back. Light brown **Asian Palm Swifts** (13cm) have long extended tail feathers and long, sickle-shaped wings. Equally long-tailed is the **Common Swift** (17cm), which is dark except for its light throat. The similar **Fork-tailed Swift** (18cm) has a white rump. The large **Alpine Swift** (22cm) is the only swift with white belly and throat. The longest tail is reserved for the blue-grey **Crested Treeswift** (23cm). Needletails are very fast swifts with needle-like extensions to their otherwise stumpy tails. The **White-rumped Needletail** (11cm) has a distinct white belly and rump. The much bigger **Brown-backed Needletail** of the SW and NE (23cm, no photo) has a dark rump and a white, dark bordered area on the under-belly.

4

5

2 House Swift in flight.
3 Common Swifts breed in the high NW Himalaya.
4 Asian Palm Swifts breed in trees throughout India apart from the NW.
5 Himalayan Swiftlets breed in the Himalaya.

Sandgrouse

Sandgrouse are plump pigeon-like birds of desert and semi-desert habitats. Males of most species have long, pointed tails. They feed mainly on seeds and collect at traditional water holes.

The **Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse** (28cm) is yellow like other sandgrouse, with chestnut belly and a narrow black-and-white band over the chest. Females show black streaking over the crown, neck, upper chest and back. In Ladakh, look for the **Tibetan Sandgrouse** (48cm, no photo) which is sandy-brown with yellow face-patch and, in the female, finely barred crown, mantle and breast.

Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse live on fallow land and dry plains with scrub and are resident in most of India apart from extreme N and S.

6 Fork-tailed Swifts breed in the Himalaya and are seen in the SW.
7 Alpine Swifts are seen all over the Himalaya, W and S India.
8 Crested Treeswifts inhabit forests throughout India apart from the NW.
9 Himalayan Swiftlet.
10 White-rumped Needletails are seen in the Himalaya and W Ghats.

Parakeets

Rose-ringed Parakeets are seen in parks, gardens and cultivation.

Those long-tailed, green, screeching and chattering birds of gardens and parks all over India are not parrots but parakeets. They also occur in open forest and feed on fruits, flowers and seeds.

One of the commonest and most widespread parakeets in India, the **Rose-ringed Parakeet** (42cm), has a black-and-pink line running from throat to neck in the male. Call: a loud 'ki-ki-ki-ki'. The larger **Alexandrine Parakeet** (53cm) differs in that it has red shoulder-patches. Also note that the black of the collar is replaced by red on the hind-neck. The call is a harsher 'kreeaaa'. The **Plum-headed Parakeet** (36cm) shows a red (male) or blue-grey (female) head. Calls include 'koi, koi' and 'twink'. In the Himalaya they can be seen alongside **Slaty-headed Parakeets** (41cm), differing in that both sexes have slaty-coloured heads. Note that compared to female Plum-headed Parakeets they also have red shoulder-patches while their tail tips are yellow instead of white. The call is also different; a loud 'preee'.

2

3

2 Alexandrine Parakeets prefer slightly more wooded areas throughout India, but not in the far S and SE.
3 Slaty-headed Parakeets breed up to the treeline in the Himalaya.
4 Plum-headed Parakeets breed in forests up to 2200m through much of India.

4

2 Malabar Parakeets live in the W Ghats.
3 Female Plum-headed Parakeet (see p 56).
4 Vernal Hanging Parrots are found in the hills of the SW and in the E.

The **Red-breasted Parakeet** (38cm) is the only parakeet with a pink breast. The grey head is demarcated by a broad black band that extends from throat to ear-coverts. The **Malabar Parakeet** (38cm) is blue-backed with a blue-grey face, showing a broad black band over the chin. The call is described as 'screet-screet' and 'cheechi-chichichi'. The tiny green **Vernal Hanging Parrot** (14cm) is short-tailed and has a red rump. Call: 'chit-chit-chit'. In Sri Lanka the **Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot** (14cm, no photo) is common. A red crown and red eye-ring set it apart from the previous species.

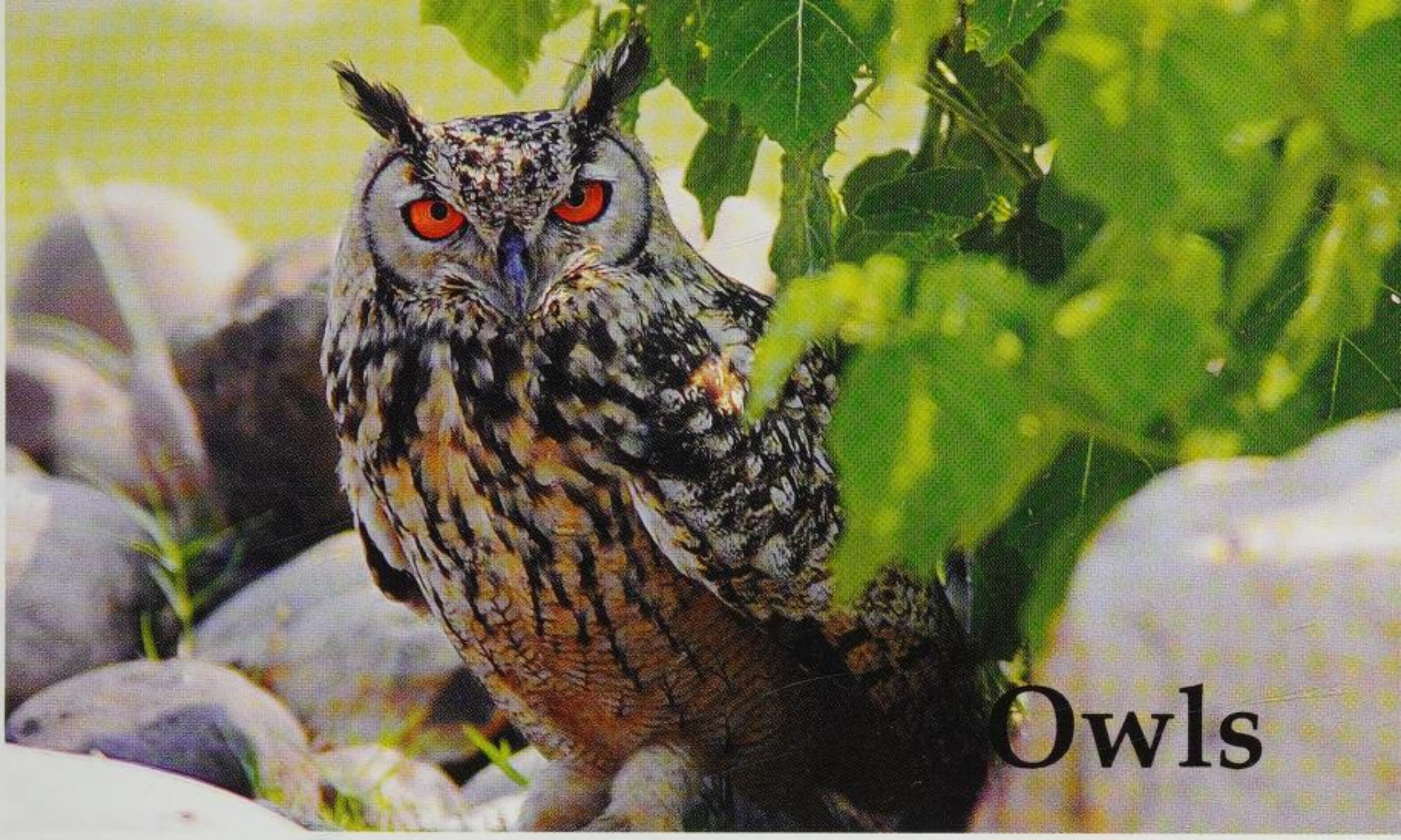
Red-breasted Parakeets are residents of the C and E Himalaya.

Frogmouth & nightjars

Owl-like but with long wings and tails, nightjars and frogmouths are strictly nocturnal. They roost during the day and are out feeding at night.

The **Sri Lanka Frogmouth** (23cm) is large-headed with a very broad beak. The male has a cryptic nightjar-like plumage with a dark band over the breast. Females are rufous with several rows of white dots on the upper and underparts. Various species of nightjar are very similar to each other and don't often allow close-up scrutiny or photography. Calls are therefore important in identification. The call of the **Indian Nightjar** (24cm, no photo) sounds like a ping-pong ball falling on a table: 'tok-tok-toktoktok trrrrr'. All India. The **Savannah Nightjar** (25cm, no photo) of the NW calls a lashing 'shweeeep'. The **Grey Nightjar** (32cm) makes long calls of rapidly repeated 'chok-chok-chok-chok' etc. The **Large-tailed Nightjar** (33cm) calls a 'chaunk' at intervals. The call of the **Jerdon's Nightjar** (28cm, no photo) of the S is similar but ends in a quiver.

1 The Sri Lanka Frogmouth - here a female - occurs in evergreen forest in parts of the W Ghats and Sri Lanka.
2 Large-tailed Nightjars inhabit forests in the Himalayan foothills and E India.
3 Grey Nightjars occur in scrub and open woodland throughout India.

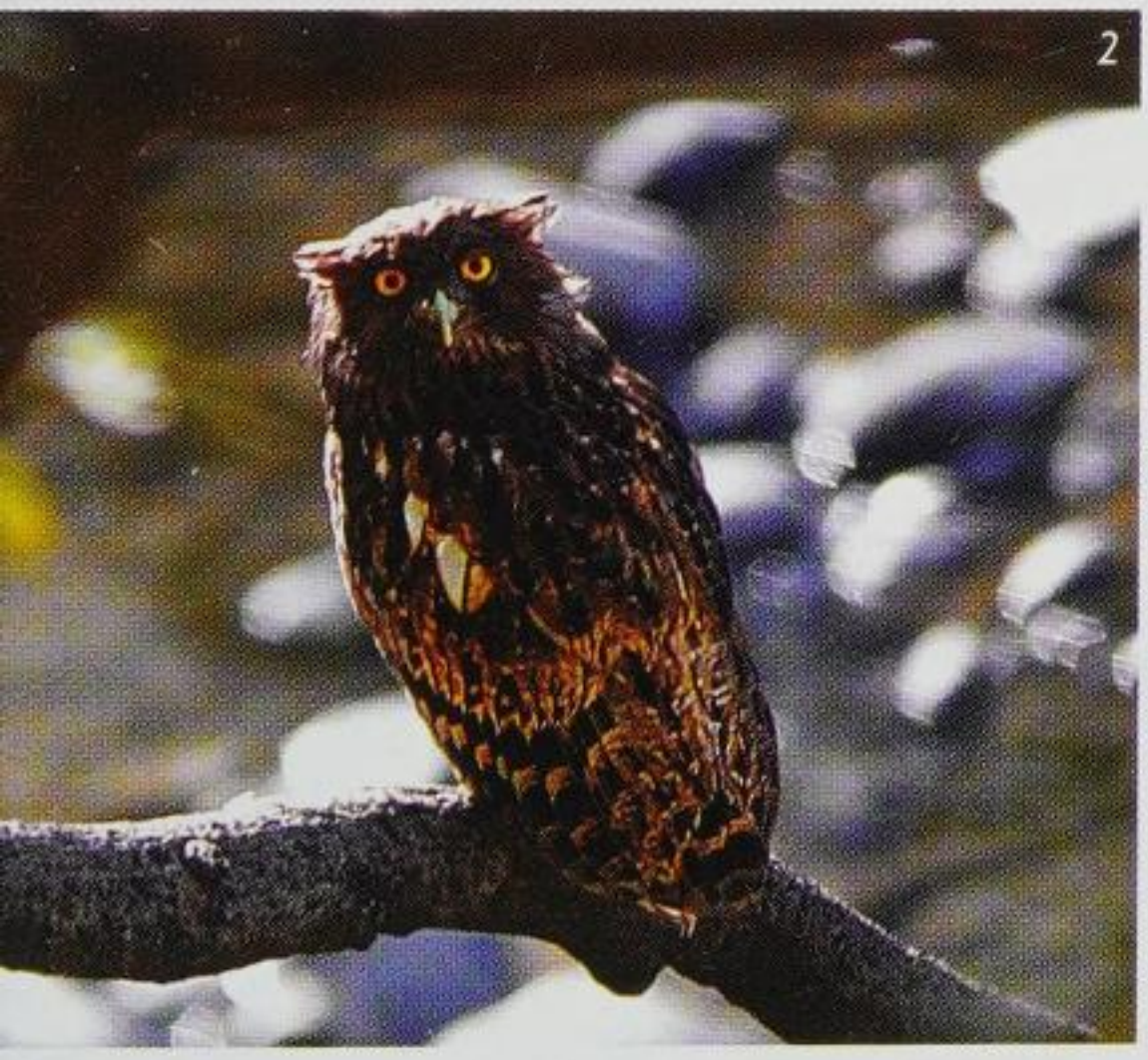


Owls

Eurasian Eagle Owls are thinly distributed throughout India in wooded or open country.

Owls are birds of prey adapted to night-time hunting, though not all species are entirely nocturnal. They are short-necked with large eyes set in rounded facial discs that help tune in to sound. They prey on small mammals and insects, and some species catch fish.

The bulky **Eurasian Eagle Owl** (66cm) has conspicuous ear tufts. The lowland race is warm-buff, boldly streaked dark. The Himalayan race is greyer. Call: 'wo-hoe', the second syllable higher. The tufted **Dusky Eagle Owl** (58cm, no photo) is grey with fine streaking. Its call is a sliding 'wo wo wo-wo wowowo'. The **Brown Fish Owl** (56cm) has more horizontal ear tufts. The streaking on the chest is narrower than on the richer-coloured and rarer Tawny Fish Owl (61cm) and it shows fine cross-barring. The call is a deep 'whoem'. Resident in non-desert parts of India. The **Tawny Owl** (47cm) is a smaller, medium-sized owl with a rounded head that doesn't carry ear tufts. Its call is a 'oe-hoe', the second syllable lower. The **Brown Wood Owl** (53cm, no photo) is chocolate-brown with light cross-barring and yellowish face-mask.



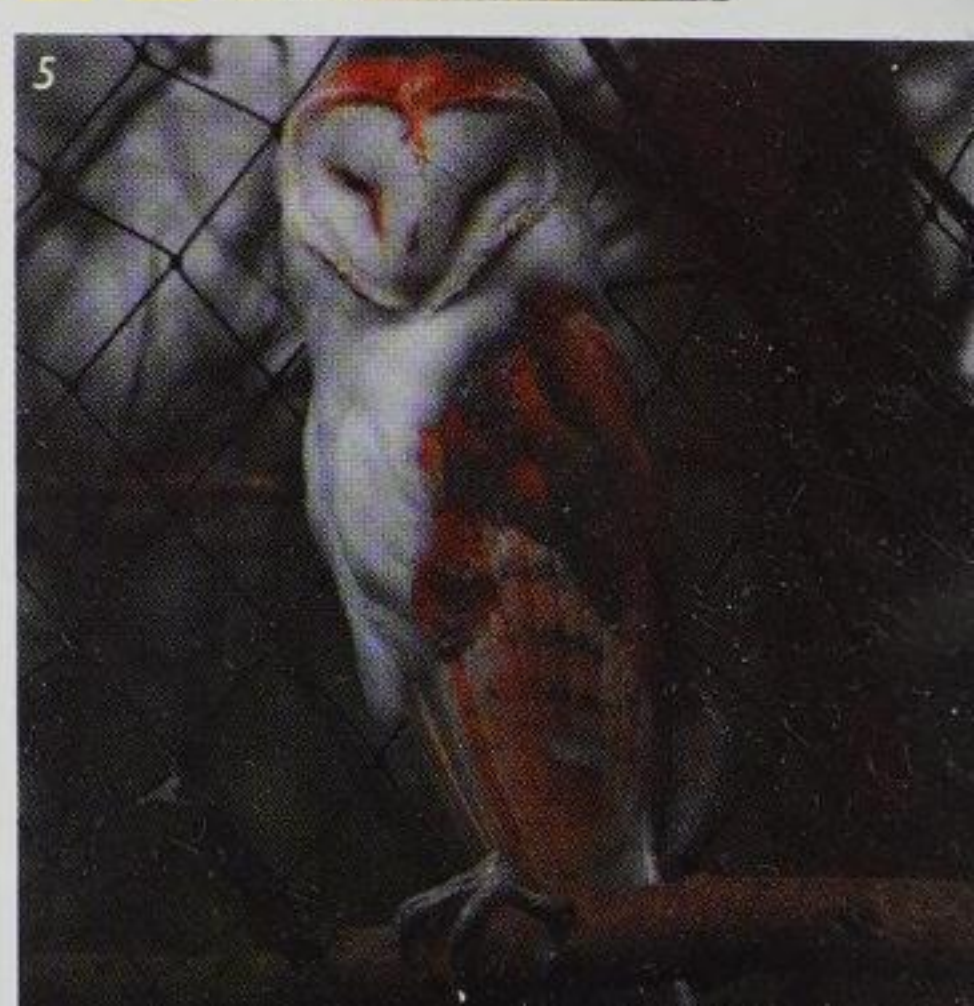
2 Brown Fish Owls are found in forests near streams over much of India.

3 Tawny Fish Owls are rare residents of forests in the Himalaya.

4 Tawny Owls live in temperate forests of the Himalaya.

1 Asian Barred Owlets breed in all types of forest in the Himalayan foothills up to 2500m.
2 Brown Hawk Owls reside in well-wooded areas in the W, S and E, and in the C Himalaya.
3 Collared Owlets breed between 1800 and 3000m in the Himalaya.
4 Jungle Owlets prefer better-wooded habitats throughout India, apart from dry regions of the NW.
5 Barn Owls live in ruins, old buildings and disused wells and have an all-India distribution, except for parts of the E and NW.

The **Asian Barred Owlet** (23cm) is a familiar owl of the Himalaya that is often seen and heard during the day. Its overall cross-barring is only broken on the flanks and belly. Its calls include a 'kewie, kewiek, kewiek' sometimes accelerating into a climax, and a drawn-out 'wowowowowowowowwo'. The **Jungle Owlet** (20cm) is slightly smaller and more rounded. The barring is finer and it has rufous on the wings where the Asian Barred has only has a faint hint of rufous. Its call is a 'kao, kao, kao, kao-kuk'. The **Collared Owlet** (17cm) is like a miniature Jungle Owlet but with two 'eyes' on the back of its head. It produces a pleasant 'tu-tutu-tu'. The **Barn Owl** (36cm) is a unique, light cream and white owl with heart-shaped face. It emits eerie hissing grunts and shrieks. The **Brown Hawk Owl** (32cm) is relatively long-bodied, chocolate-brown owl with a banded tail. Its call is a pleasant 'oewoop', the second syllable higher.



Spotted Owlets inhabit open country with trees, gardens etc. in the entire subcontinent up to 1500m in the foothills.

2 Short-eared Owls are scarce winter visitors to much of India in open cultivation, scrub and grassland.
3 Collared Scops Owls are resident in many parts of India.
4 Oriental Scops Owls are quite common in forests in the Himalaya and W Ghats.

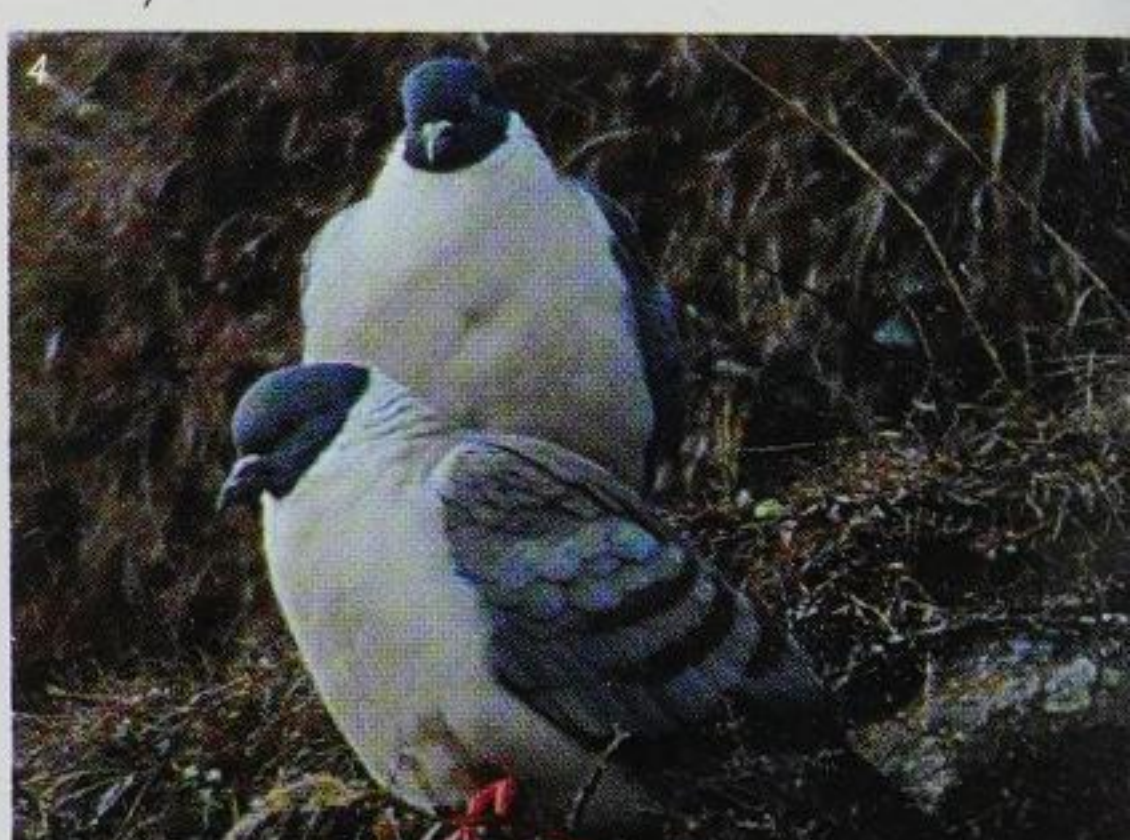
The **Spotted Owlet** (21cm) is India's commonest small owl and is often seen in daylight, sunning itself while perched in trees or on wires. The size of a myna, it is grey with white dots on the upperparts and crown. The face and underparts have more white. Calls include 'churrr, churrr' and 'kewak'. A **Short-eared Owl** (37cm) is often out during the day. When flying it can seem almost entirely white from below, but is mottled above like a typical owl. Scops owls are small nocturnal owls with long, vertical ear tufts. The **Collared Scops Owl** (23cm) is a light coloured owl with long ear tufts (not visible in photo). The underparts are light cream with some streaking. It makes a questioning 'pwok?' The **Oriental Scops Owl** (19cm) is similar but smaller with shorter ear tufts. It also has more streaking or barring on the underparts and white dots on the upperparts. It calls 'uk-ukroo' and occurs in brown and rufous plumages. In the Himalaya listen to the monotonous 'tut-tut' of the **Mountain Scops Owl** (20cm, no photo).

Pigeons & doves

Laughing Doves live in cultivation with scrub and trees in most of the subcontinent.

Gregarious middle-sized birds that feed on seeds, buds, leaves and fruits; many species are migratory or nomadic. Typical in this family, the head is small in comparison to the body.

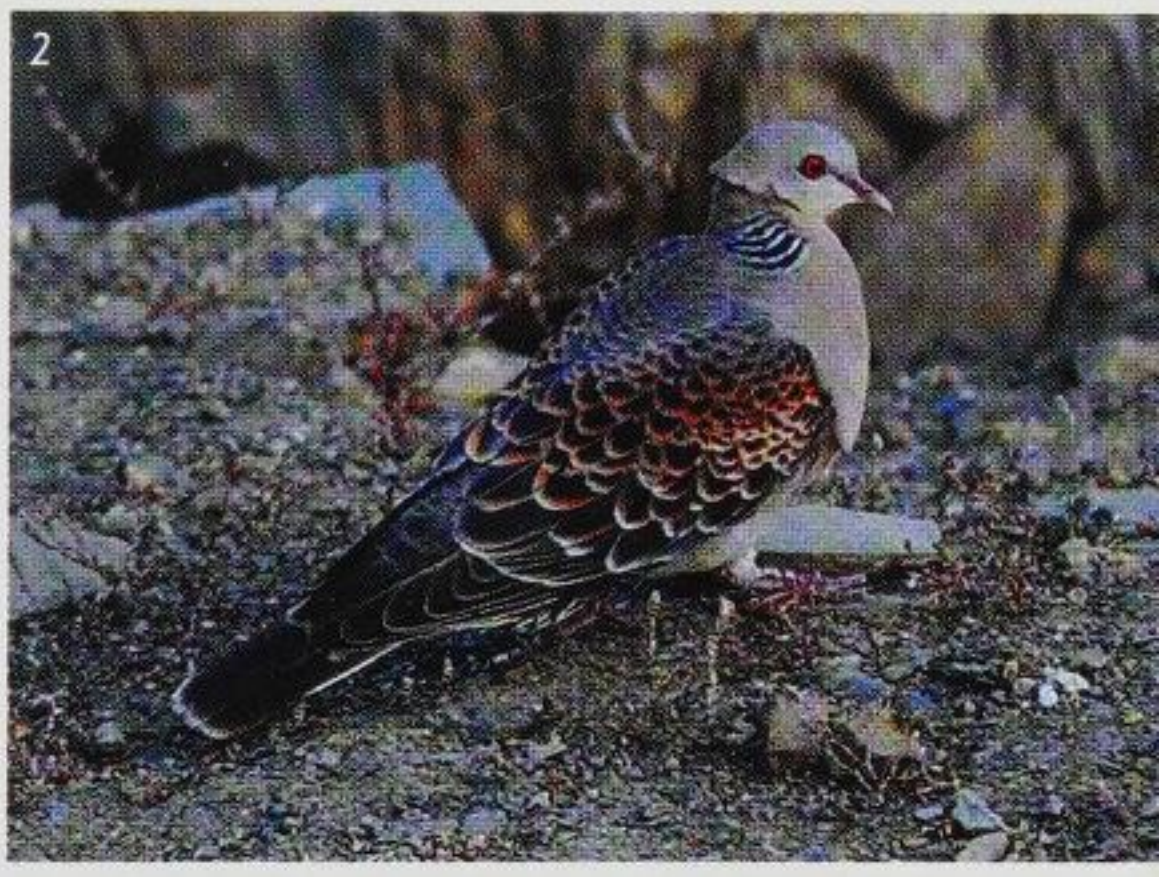
The orange-brown **Laughing Dove** (27cm) is a small dove with a soothing 'coo-roo-roo-roorooroo' call, seen in low trees near cultivation, often in fairly dry areas. Note the vertical black streaks on the neck and the bluish areas in the wings. The **Rock Pigeon** (33cm) is a familiar bird of towns and villages. The **Hill Pigeon** (33cm) of Ladakh is similar but with white patch on rump and white band on tail, features shared by the cream and white **Snow Pigeon** (34cm) that has a black head and tail.

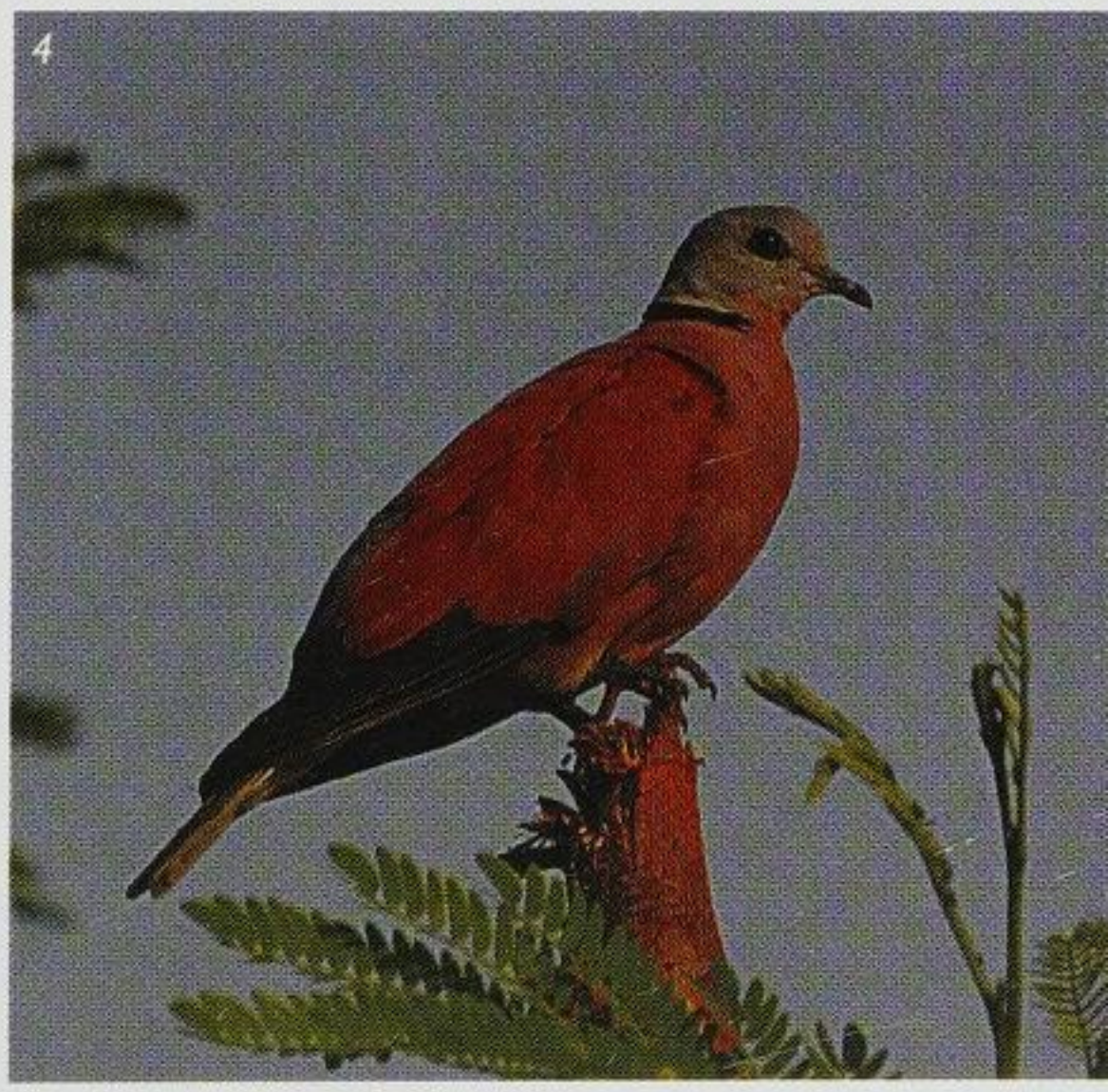


2 Rock Pigeons occur everywhere in the subcontinent.
3 Hill Pigeons live in the Trans-Himalaya.
4 Snow Pigeons have a wider distribution along the high Himalaya.

Spotted Doves occur in all types of wooded areas all over India.

The smallish and slim-bodied **Spotted Dove** (30cm) is salmon in colour with brown upperparts that are dotted with light and dark spots. A black patch spotted with white on the neck distinguishes it from the **Oriental Turtle Dove** (33cm) whose neck-patch is barred. This species also has rufous upperparts. The **Eurasian Collared Dove** (32cm) is a common bird in most of India. The black-and-white collar on the neck distinguishes it from all other doves except for the smaller and more compact **Red Collared Dove** (23cm). The male of this species has a purple-brown back and the plumage of the female is similar to the Eurasian Collared Dove, but note the absence of white in the collar and the much shorter tail.





2 Oriental Turtle Doves are resident in N, E and C India; winter in W and NW, summer in the Himalaya.
3 Eurasian Collared Doves live in trees and hedges near fields, village groves etc. over much of the subcontinent.
4 Red Collared Doves inhabit similar areas.

Emerald Doves occur over most of India, apart from the NW.

The **Emerald Dove** (27cm) is an handsome dove of the lower storeys of thick forest. Like other doves, it often feeds on the ground. A handsome inhabitant of the Himalaya is the purple and grey **Speckled Wood Pigeon** (38cm). The **Nilgiri Wood Pigeon** (42cm) is a handsome, large pigeon. It is blue-grey below and purple on the upperparts, with a check-pattern on the hind-neck. The **Green Imperial Pigeon** (51cm) is grey with dark green upperparts and no patch in the neck. Note the white wing-bars of the light grey to lilac **Common Wood Pigeon** (43cm, no photo) in flight. Considerable numbers winter in the W Himalaya.

2 Speckled Wood Pigeons are found in temperate forests of the Himalaya up to the treeline.
3 Nilgiri Wood Pigeons live in W Ghats forest coming down close to the coast.
4 The Green Imperial Pigeon is found in forests in SW and E India.

Yellow-footed Green Pigeons feed on fruits in large trees.

The **Yellow-footed Green Pigeon** (33cm) is a nomadic resident over much of India. It has light green wings and yellow-green neck. Head and underparts are light grey. The **Pompadour Green Pigeon** (28cm) has fully chestnut upperparts in the male. The **Orange-breasted Green Pigeon** (29cm, no photo) of the E and W Ghats and the C and NE Himalaya is green on both under- and upperparts. Distinctive are the grey hind-neck and, in the male, a pink and orange breast-patch. The **Pin-tailed Green Pigeon** (42cm) is green with a long tail. The **Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon** (33cm) of the Himalaya is deeper green than the Yellow-footed. Additionally it has red instead of yellow feet and the males have chestnut shoulders.

2 Pompadour Green Pigeons inhabit the forests of the SW and NE.
3 Pin-tailed Green Pigeons visit broadleaved forests in the C and E Himalaya.
4 Wedge-tailed Green Pigeons live in Himalayan forests up to 2500m.

Purple Swamphens are seen in marshland habitat.

Crakes & rails

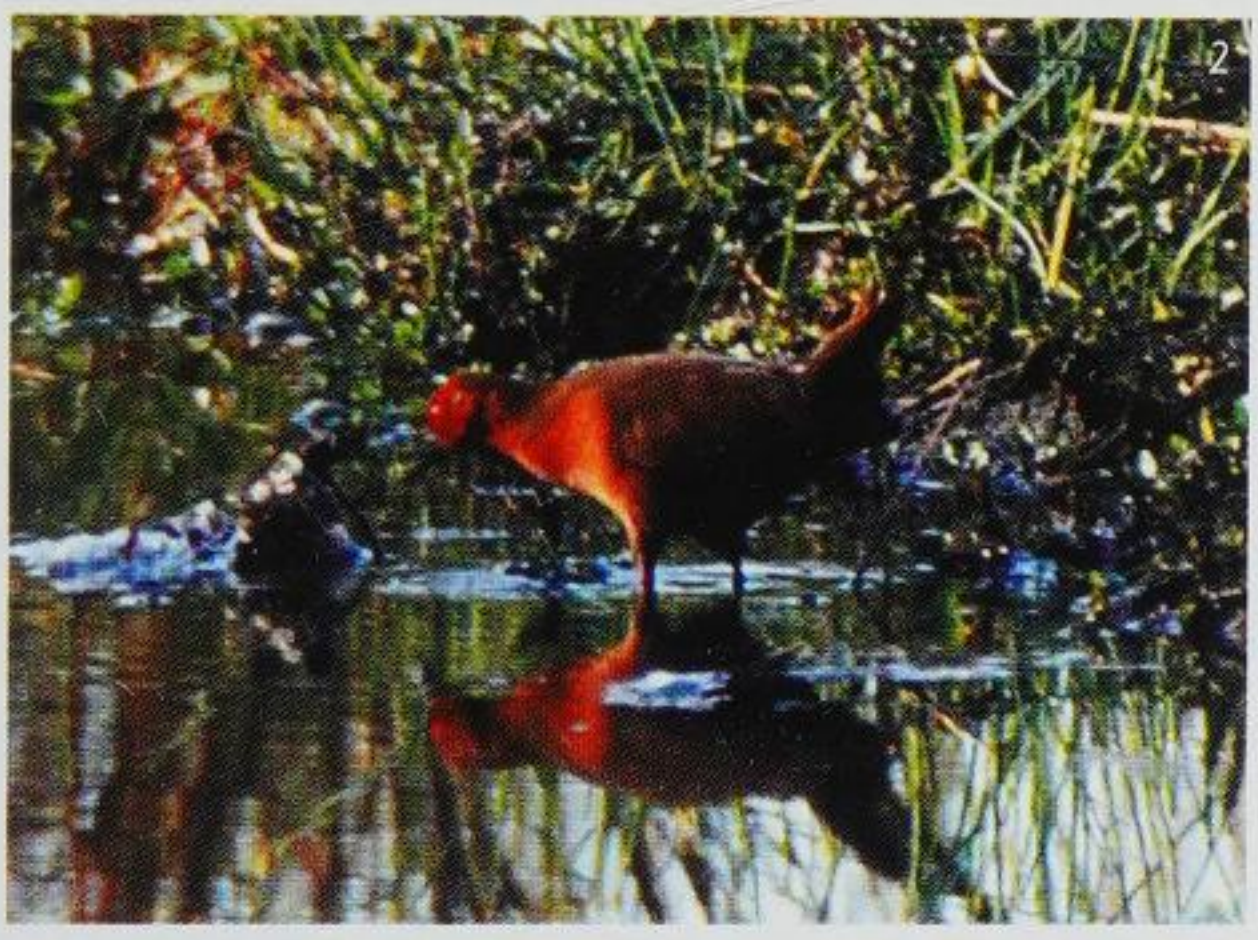
Short-tailed and large-footed, crakes are more often heard than seen. With wintering species being largely silent, such birds are easily overlooked in the thick marshland habitats they inhabit. They walk with a jerking tail movement and disappear into vegetation when disturbed. Crakes feed on insects, amphibians, fish and plant material. The first four species on this page are larger and confiding and resident over most of the subcontinent, while the rest of the species are smaller, less common and relatively shyer.

The **Purple Swamphen** (43cm) is often out in the open exposing its glitzy plumage. When in cover it has a rich repertoire of screams, hoots and chuckles. **Watercocks** (43cm, no photo) are large black birds with a yellow bill with a red horn on the crown. Non-breeding birds are light brown, including the bill, with fine dark barring on the upperparts. They are patchily distributed in many regions of India. **Common Coots** (42cm) are the only one of this group that spend most time on open water where they congregate in great concentrations with duck. The **Common Moorhen** (32cm) is the only other member of the family that regularly swims, but it also spends much time in vegetation from where it calls 'kirrrrk', 'kek' etc. The **White-breasted Waterhen** (32cm) is more withdrawn but not as shy as the species on the next page. It produces loud 'kok' and 'khwak' calls.

2 Common Coots are seen year-round in most of the subcontinent.

3 Common Moorhens live in marshes, around ponds etc. all through the subcontinent.

4 White-breasted Waterhens are found in small swamps, around village ponds and in marshes all over India.



Brown Crakes (28cm) are dusky-brown with greyer underparts and a light throat. Juvenile White-breasted Waterhens can look similar but they have more extensive white on the throat and also white patches under the tail. The Brown Crake has a rattling call, increasing in pitch and intensity before trailing off: 'drrrrrrrrrrRRRRRRRrrrrr'. The smaller **Ruddy-breasted Crake** (22cm) is bright rufous below with white barring under the tail. Look for the red legs and yellowish bill. The **Water Rail** (28cm) is striped dark and light brown above with black-and-white barred belly. The undertail-coverts show white. It has a conspicuous long red bill. The **Baillon's Crake** (19cm, no photo) is similar but smaller, with greyer breast and a short yellowish bill. The black-and-white barring extends to the undertail-coverts. A winter visitor to most of the subcontinent apart from arid areas in the NW.

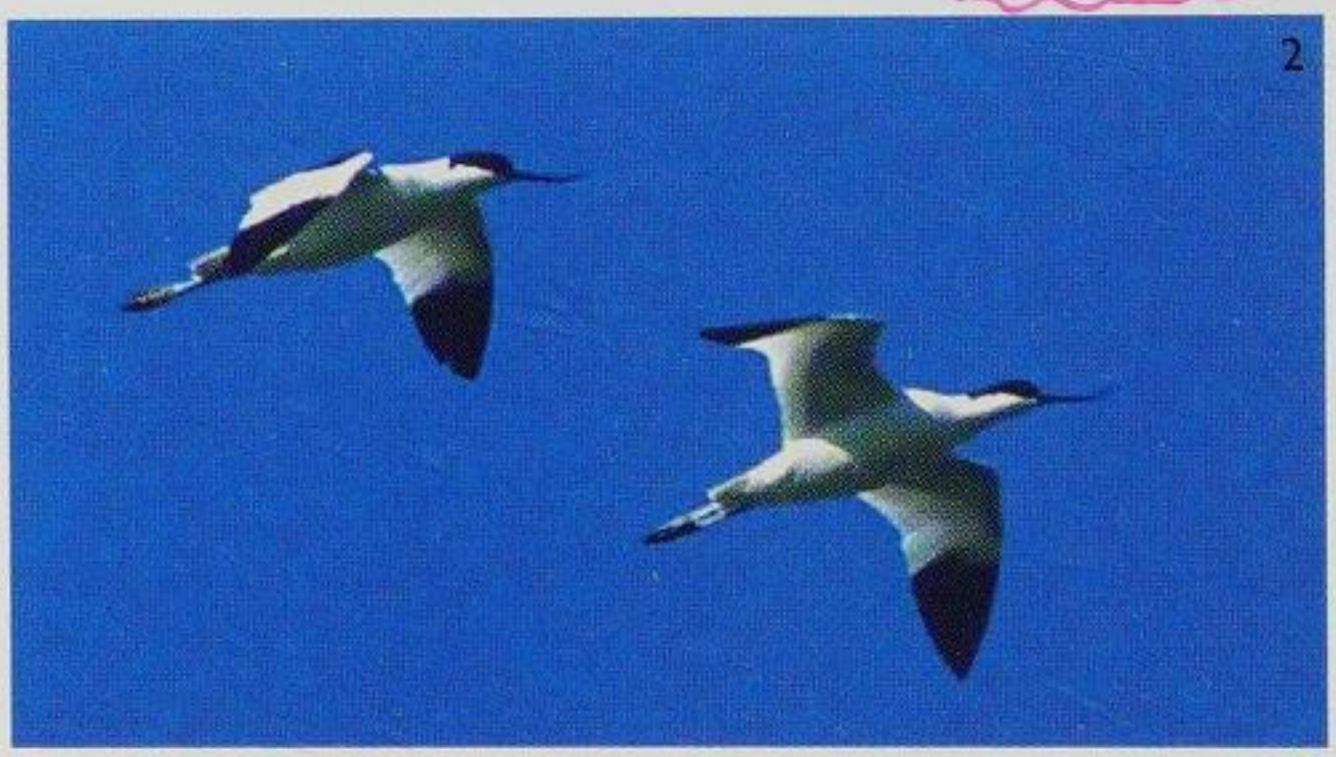
1 Brown Crakes are resident in most of India, apart from SW and SE.
2 Ruddy-breasted Crakes are found in NW, SW and NE India.
3 Juvenile Common Moorhen (see p 66).
4 Water Rail breed in Kashmir and winter in small numbers mainly in the NW.

Waders

Black-winged Stilt.

A large and varied group of middle-sized birds that live on the ground and feed in or along water, while some species breed in drier country. Waders mainly feed on worms, insects and molluscs found by probing into water, mud and soil with their bills.

The **Black-winged Stilt** (25cm) is India's most familiar wader, found wherever there is water. Its very tall legs allow it to feed in fairly deep water. The handsome **Pied Avocet** (46cm) is black-and-white with an upturned bill that is a unique feeding tool used to sift mud for tiny insects. The **Pheasant-tailed Jacana** (31cm) has a characteristic plumage in summer with yellow neck and chocolate belly, carrying a tail almost as long as its body length. The **Bronze-winged Jacana** (30cm) lacks the tail but has attractive black underparts with a green cast and contrasting white supercilium.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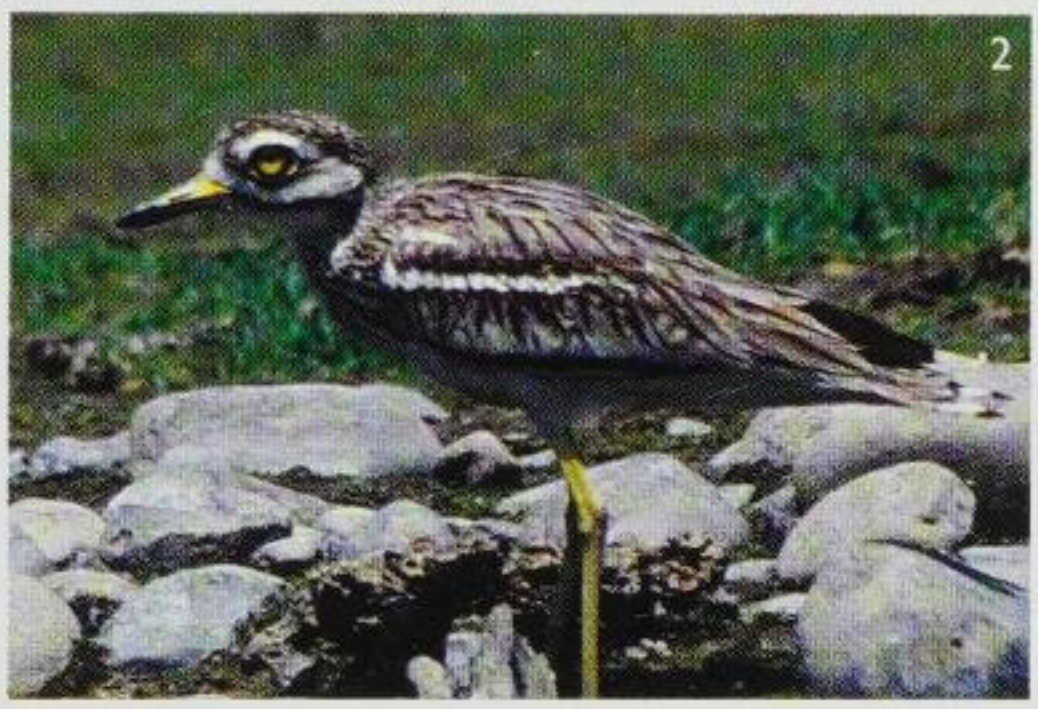
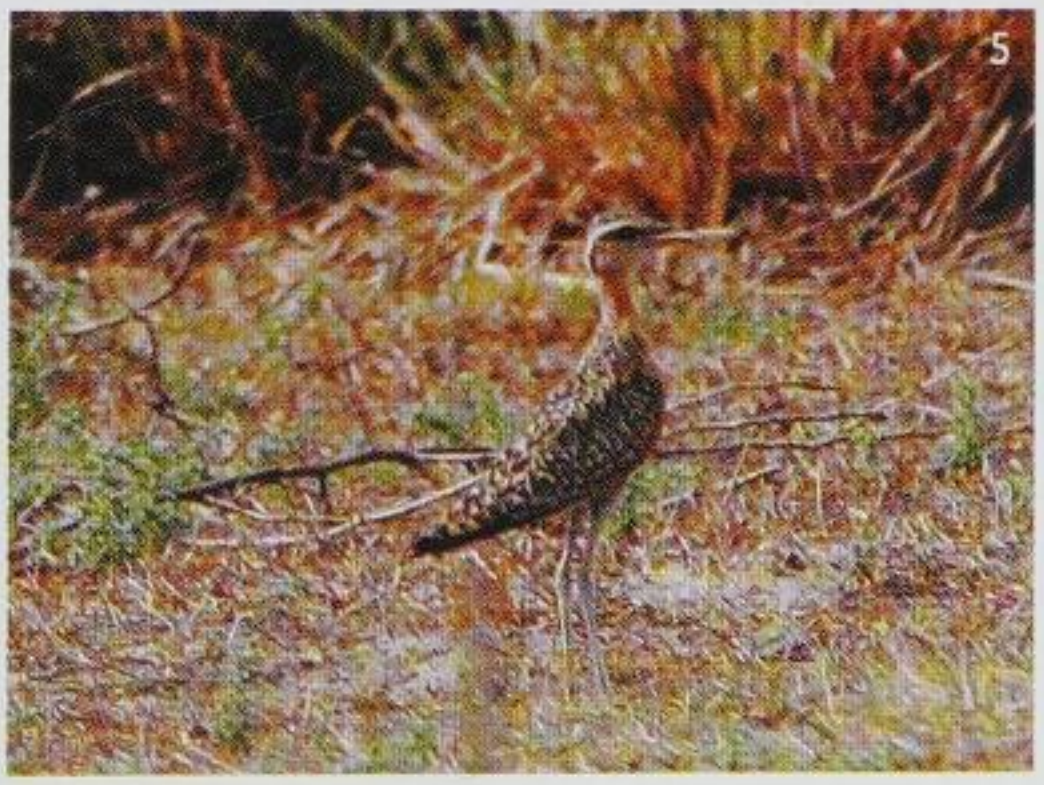
2 Pied Avocets winter at lagoons, marshes and jheels in NW and SE India.
3 Pheasant-tailed Jacanas breed on ponds and marshes with floating vegetation in most of the subcontinent.
4 Bronze-winged Jacanas are found in similar habitats.

Great Thick-knees are seen along riverbanks and around lakes in parts of N, W and S India.

The **Great Thick-knee** (52cm) is a striking, large-headed wader of shores, riverbanks and reservoirs. The **Eurasian Thick-knee** (41cm) has a similar shape but it is streaked, sandy brown and with a weaker head pattern and a smaller bill. The large eyes indicate its night habits. When it flies up, the wings show dark flight feathers with white patches. The **Eurasian Curlew** (58cm) is India's largest wader, unmistakable with its very long, down-curved bill. Its call is a loud, 'curlee'. The **Whimbrel** (43cm) is a small, shorter-billed version with a characteristic 'bi-bi-bi-bi-bi' call. The **Indian Courser** (23cm) has chestnut-brown crown and underparts while the head pattern is dominated by a long white supercilium and a black line through the eye. The fine bill is down-curved.

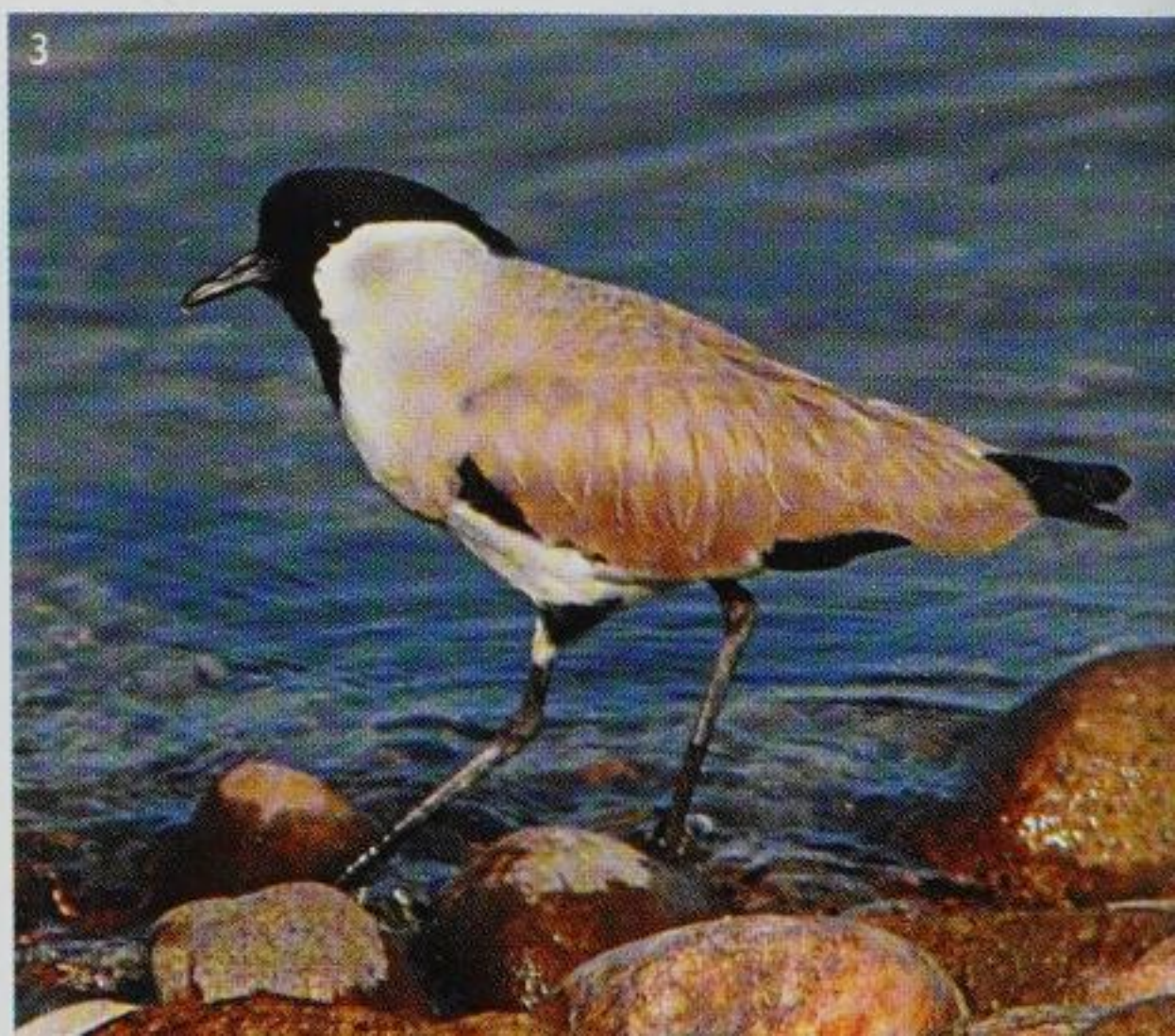


2 Eurasian Thick-knees have an all-India distribution and breed in semi-desert and dry, open woodland.
3 Eurasian Curlews visit wetlands and coast in the NW and W in winter.
4 Whimbrels winter in coastal areas.
5 Indian Coursers - here a juvenile - breed in arid areas in C and NW India.



Red-wattled Lapwing.

The **Red-wattled Lapwing** (33cm) is one of India's most familiar waders, inhabiting fields, wetlands, village ponds and also open woodland. Its 'teetaree' call is as unmistakable as its plumage and is frequently heard at night. The similar **Yellow-wattled Lapwing** (27cm) is a bit smaller, with a black cap and a yellow 'wattle'. Call: a restless 'we-whewhewhewhewhe'. The **River Lapwing** (31cm) is light brown with a black-hooded head and white cheeks. The yellow-legged **White-tailed Lapwing** (28cm) is grey-brown with cream belly and short black bill. The similar **Grey-headed Lapwing** (37cm, no photo) has a black-tipped yellow bill and a white belly, with a black band bordering the grey breast. The **Northern Lapwing** (31cm) has a flat crest and bronze-green upperparts. The **Little Ringed Plover** (17cm) is the smallest and commonest plover, breeding across the entire region. Black breast-band and facial mask turn brown in winter. The yellow eye-ring is unique. Calls: 'peew', 'piu-piu-piu'. The **Kentish Plover** (17cm) has a larger head with cream crown. **Lesser Sand Plovers** (19cm) are similar in winter with no black collar but dark dots on the sides of the breast. Note also the lack of a white hind-collar. In summer has an orange breast and neck and black face-mask. The very similar **Greater Sand Plover** (22cm) is larger-billed and has longer, lighter-coloured legs than the Lesser. **Pacific Golden Plovers** (24cm) are mottled yellow with a light belly that turns to a white-bordered black in summer. Call: 'tlu-iep'. The similar **Grey Plover** (31cm) has no yellow, and no white borders to the sides of the black underparts in summer. In flight look for the diagnostic black 'armpits'. Its call is 'pwo-ie'.



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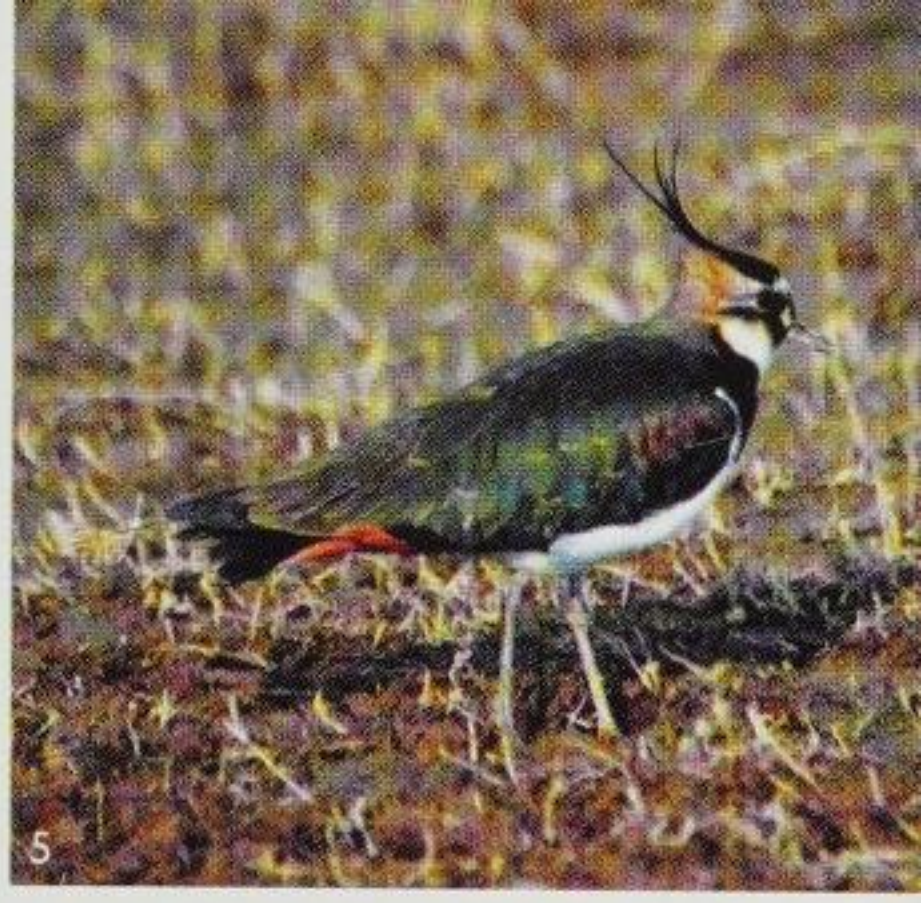
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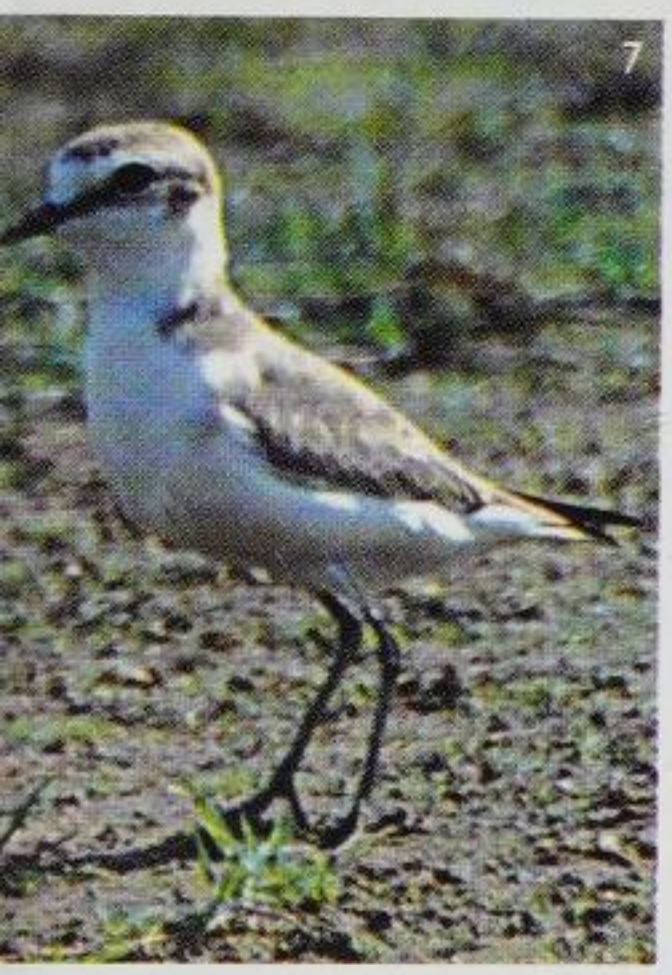
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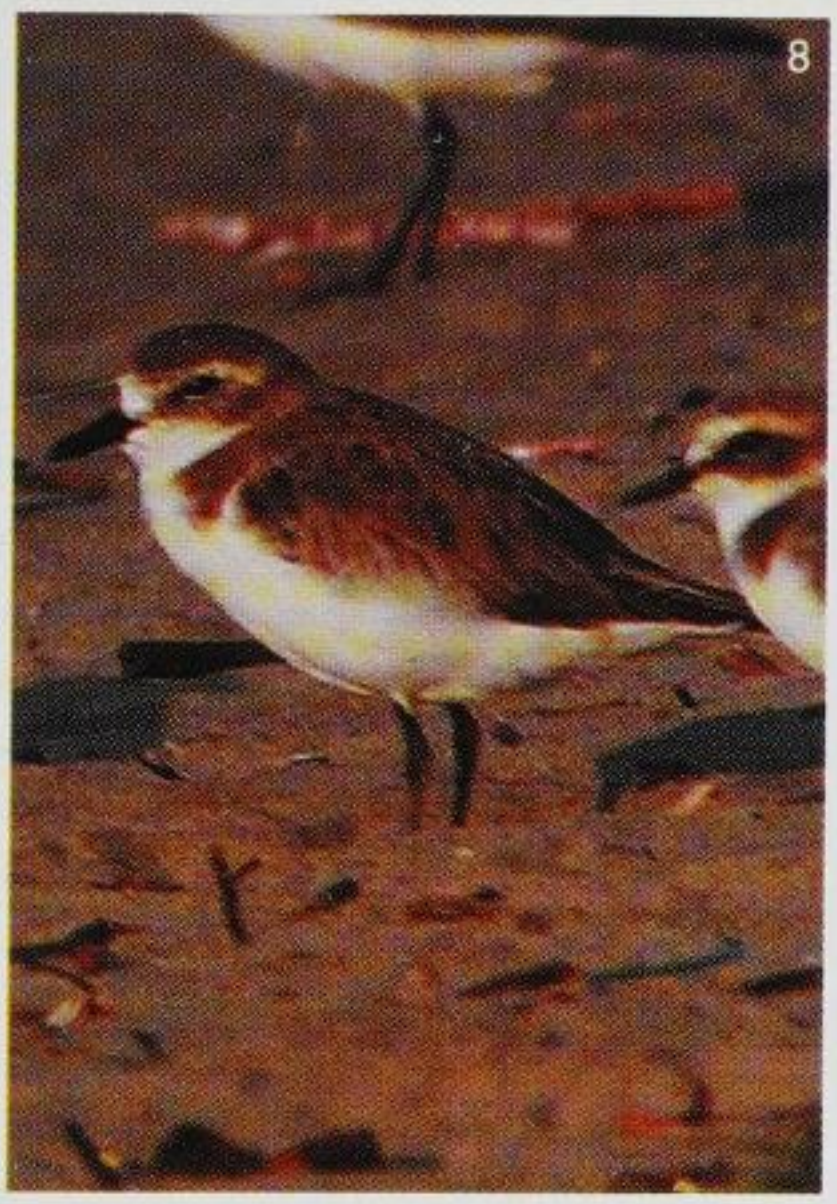
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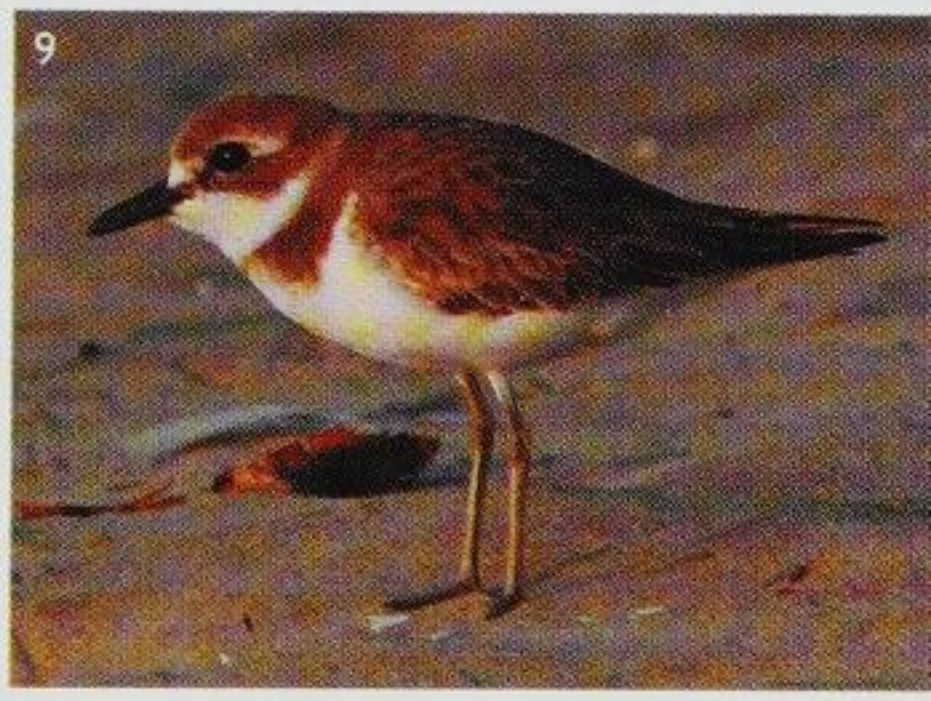
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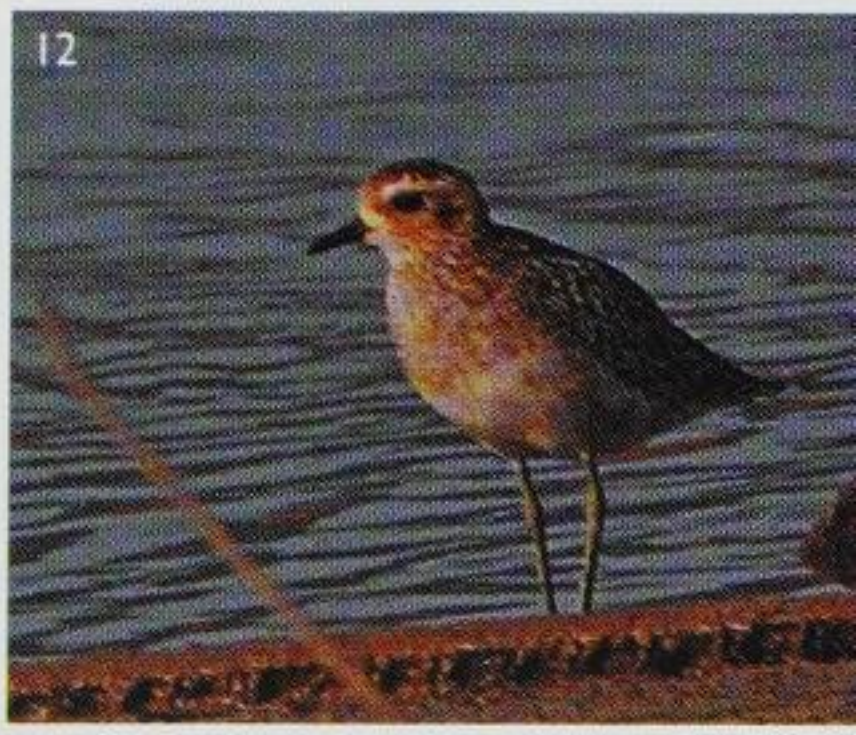
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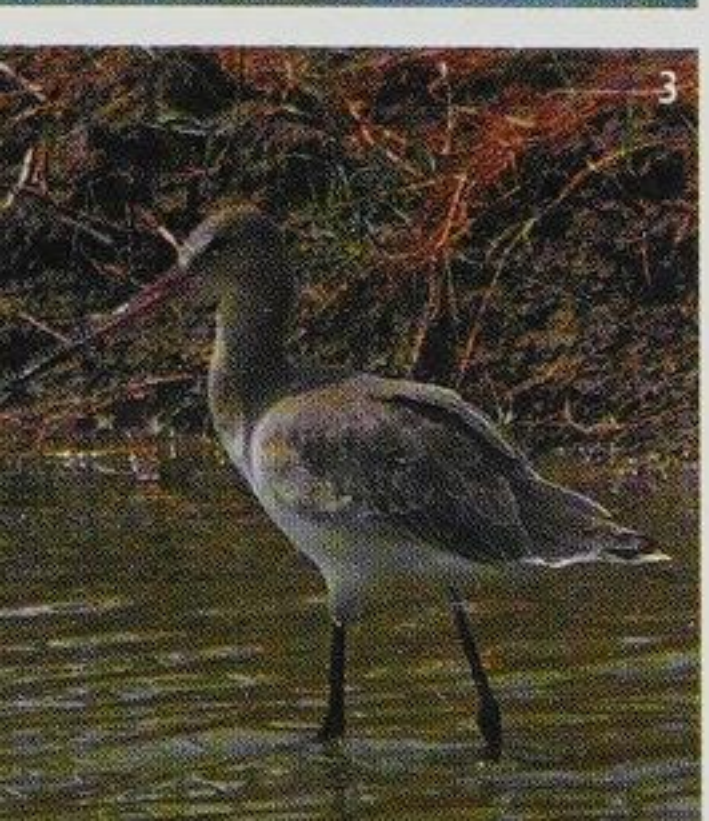
2 Yellow-wattled Lapwings breed on dry, fallow land in most of India except parts of the NE and NW.
3 River Lapwings are seen along rivers and lakeshores in N India.
4 White-tailed Lapwings typically visit marshland and grassland under water in the NW in winter.
5 The Northern Lapwing winters in NW India where it is seen on grassland and banks of rivers and reservoirs.
6 Little Ringed Plovers breed on shingle shores and mudflats up to 1500m.

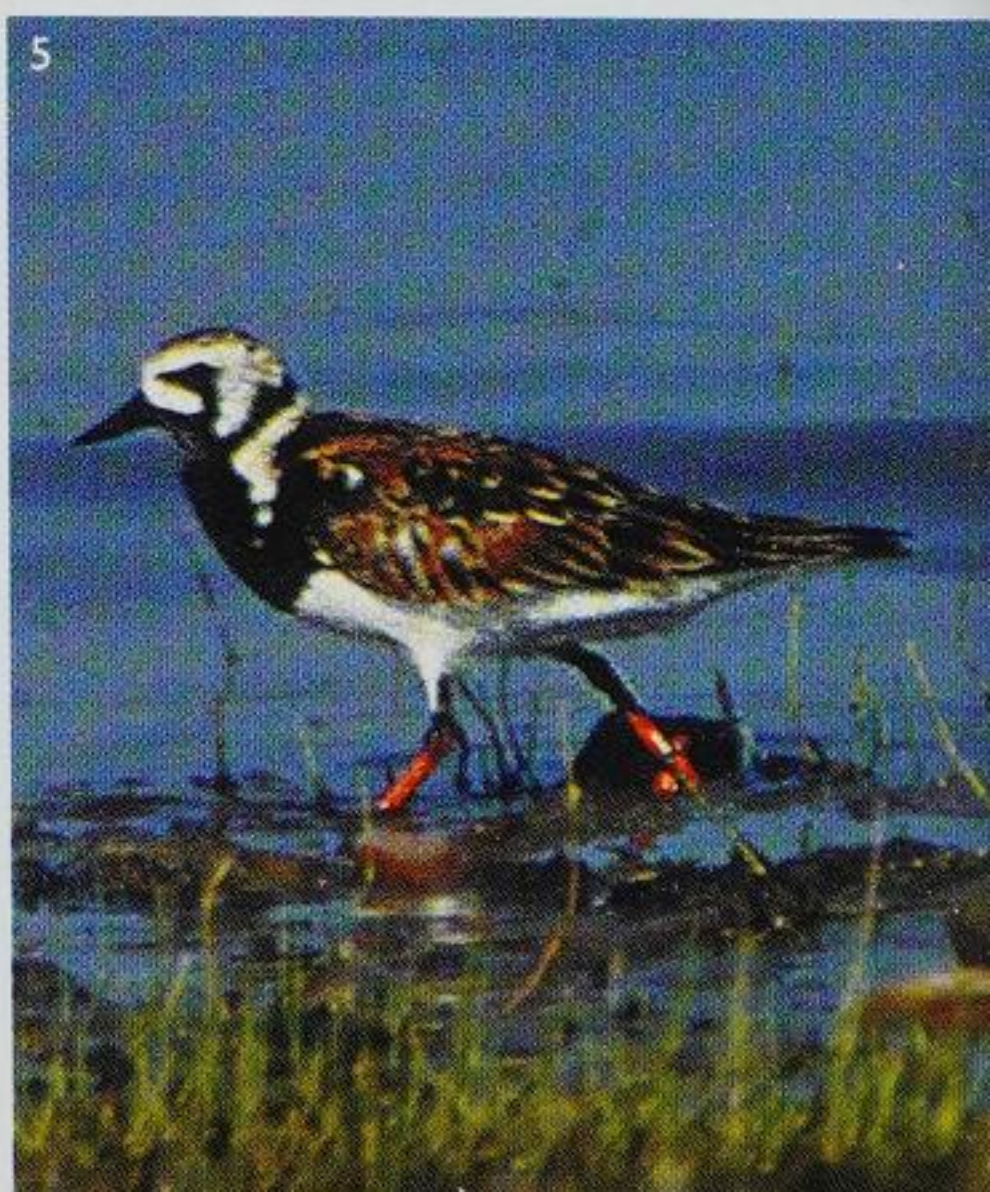
7 Kentish Plovers are found all around India on mudflats, riverbeds and along the coast. They breed in the NW.
8 Lesser Sand Plovers - here in winter plumage - winter on the coast and breed on alpine pastures in the Himalaya. To the right is a winter-plumage Kentish Plover.
9 Greater Sand Plovers also winter along the coast.
10 Pacific Golden Plovers visit mudflats and wet grassland in coastal regions, with some also seen inland.
11 Grey Plovers prefer the coastline of India.
12 Pacific Golden Plover (winter plumage).

Small Pratincoles breed along rivers, lakes and swamps in much of India apart from the far S.

The cream-coloured **Small Pratincole** (17cm) in flight somehow resembles a tern (p 76). When it flies up the wings reveal a unique black-and-white pattern. They hawk in flocks over water and land. The larger **Oriental Pratincole** (24cm) shows a black line running from the eye down and across the yellowish throat. Look for the chestnut underwings and forked tail when it flies. The **Eurasian Oystercatcher** (42cm) is a striking black, white-bellied and red-eyed winter visitor with a sturdy red bill. **Black-tailed Godwits** (46cm) differ from the waders described in the coming pages by their large size and the combination of dark wings with broad wing-bars and a broad, dark end to the tail. They develop an orange neck in summer. The **Bar-tailed Godwit** (41cm, no photo) winters on the coast and is similar but has a barred tail and is more extensively orange in winter. The **Ruddy Turnstone** (22cm) is unmistakable.

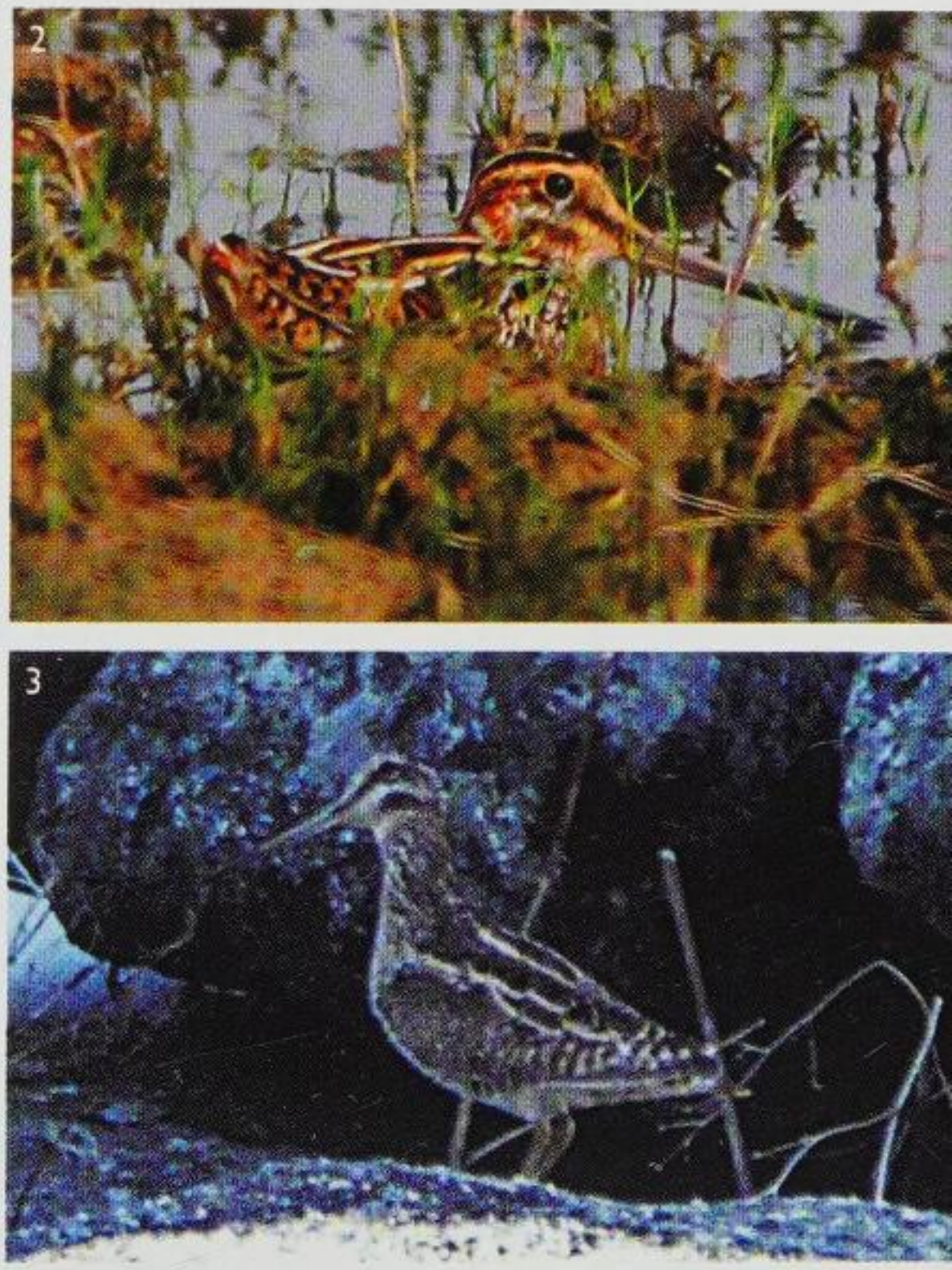


2 Oriental Pratincoles congregate over mudflats and marshes, mainly in the W and E.
3 Black-tailed Godwits winter over much of N, W and S India and are found in marshes and along muddy shores.
4 Eurasian Oystercatchers mainly visit the coast.
5 Ruddy Turnstones winter locally along the coast.



Ibisbills are found in broad, stony riverbeds, high up in the Himalaya in summer and down in the foothills during the winter.

The **Ibisbill** (41cm), a much sought-after bird of the Himalaya, is unmistakable. Despite its remarkable plumage it can be surprisingly difficult to spot amongst the stones and pebbles of its favourite mountain-stream habitat. The **Common Snipe** (27cm) is a typical snipe, dark brown, heavily mottled and scalloped, with dark bands over the crown and through the face. It has a long, straight bill and typically flies up with a grinding 'pench'. The very similar **Pintail Snipe** (27cm, no photo) is separated from the Common Snipe by the absence of a white trailing edge. The call is said to be a deeper 'squack'. Winters in the entire subcontinent apart from the NW. The **Jack Snipe** (21cm, no photo) is a little, short-billed version of the Common Snipe with a double yellow 'V' on its back. In the high Himalaya the **Solitary Snipe** (31cm) can be found. In flight it is slower than the similar Common Snipe. The **Eurasian Woodcock** (36cm, no photo) is the largest snipe, heavily built, with red-brown areas on the upperparts and cross-banding on the crown of the large head. **Greater Painted-snipe** (25cm) are unmistakable, the female brighter coloured than the male.



2 Common Snipe winter in marshland with vegetation across the entire subcontinent.
3 Solitary Snipe breed and winter in small wetlands near mountain lakes and streams.
4 Greater Painted-snipe inhabit marshy margins of pools and canals in S, W, NE and parts of N India and the Indus Valley in Pakistan.

The species described on the following pages are all typical 13-30cm-sized, dull-coloured waders commonly seen beside rivers, lakes and wetlands throughout India. Most are migratory winter visitors from July to May. The **Common Greenshank** (36cm) is grey with white underparts, light green legs and a grey-green, slightly upturned bill. In flight the white rump is long and pointed. Call: a loud 'tluu-tluu-tluu'. The **Marsh Sandpiper** (25cm) is smaller and daintier with a very fine, straight bill. Call: 'che-weep'. The **Common Redshank** (28cm) is bigger with a straight, red bill and red legs. It has a similarly pointed white rump but it is the only wader with broad white bands along the trailing edge of the wing. Call: 'tjew-tjew-tjew' and 'tyoo'. The **Spotted Redshank** (33cm) is similar but more silvery grey on the upperparts, with a longer bill and no white on the wings but a similar rump-patch. In summer it is black with white spots. Call: 'te-wit'. The **Terek Sandpiper** (24cm) is mainly a coastal visitor. It has short legs and a typical upturned bill. Note the grey rump and a narrow white band along the trailing edge of the wings. Call: 'tooit-tit-tit'. The **Ruff** (25-31cm) is stocky with a short bill. It has a thin, white wing-bar which none of the species above have. Note the dark or orangey legs and the scalloped upperparts. The **Green Sandpiper** (24cm) is halfway in size between the species above and those opposite. It has a short dark bill, green legs and dark upperparts with a green cast. Like the next species it has a round, white rump-patch. Call: 'tluwiet wit-wit'.

1 Common Greenshank.
2 Marsh Sandpiper.
3 Common Redshank.
4 Spotted Redshank.
5 Terek Sandpiper.
6 Ruff.
7 Green Sandpipers prefer edges of ponds, streams and rivers.
8 Wood Sandpipers visit muddy marshland.
9 Common Sandpipers are seen along freshwater shores.
10 Temminck's Stints are found on marshland and mudflats.
11 Little Stints visit the same.
12 Dunlins are coastal visitors while some are seen inland in the NW.
13 Curlew Sandpipers - here winter and summer plumage - have a similar distribution.
14 Broad-billed Sandpipers are found mainly near seashores.
15 Red-necked Pharalopes mainly winter offshore in Pakistan and Gujarat.

The very similar **Wood Sandpiper** (21cm) has lighter spotting, lighter green legs and a light supercilium. It calls 'tiff-iff-iff'. The **Common Sandpiper** (21cm) is shorter-legged with a well-demarcated brown breast-band. It also has broad white wing-bars and a brown rump. Flies over water with stiff wing beats, the wings curved down. Its call is a high 'tee-tee-tee'. **Temminck's Stint** (14cm) is like a miniature Common Sandpiper with greenish legs and light wing-bars. Call a high 'tirrrrrr'. The similar **Little Stint** (13cm) looks shorter-bodied and has black legs, grey sides of tail and in summer more reddish-brown upperparts. Call: 'wit-wit-wit'. The **Dunlin** (20cm) is larger with a fairly heavy and down-curved bill and a round black belly-patch in summer. Call: 'treep'. The **Curlew Sandpiper** (21cm) is similar but with a longer down-curved bill. In summer, the head and underparts turn deep red-brown. It has a white rump-patch, unlike the three previous species. Call: 'chirrp'. **Sanderlings** (19cm, no photo) are seen wintering on the coast. They are like Dunlins but with pure white underparts and a shorter, black bill. The upperparts are pale grey in winter. The similar **Broad-billed Sandpiper** (17cm) has heavily streaked crown and upperparts and a white supercilium that splits into two above the eye. The **Red-necked Phalarope** (19cm) is a very elegant, fine-billed wader that floats on the water. Its non-breeding form is pristine white and grey with black crown and band through the eye.

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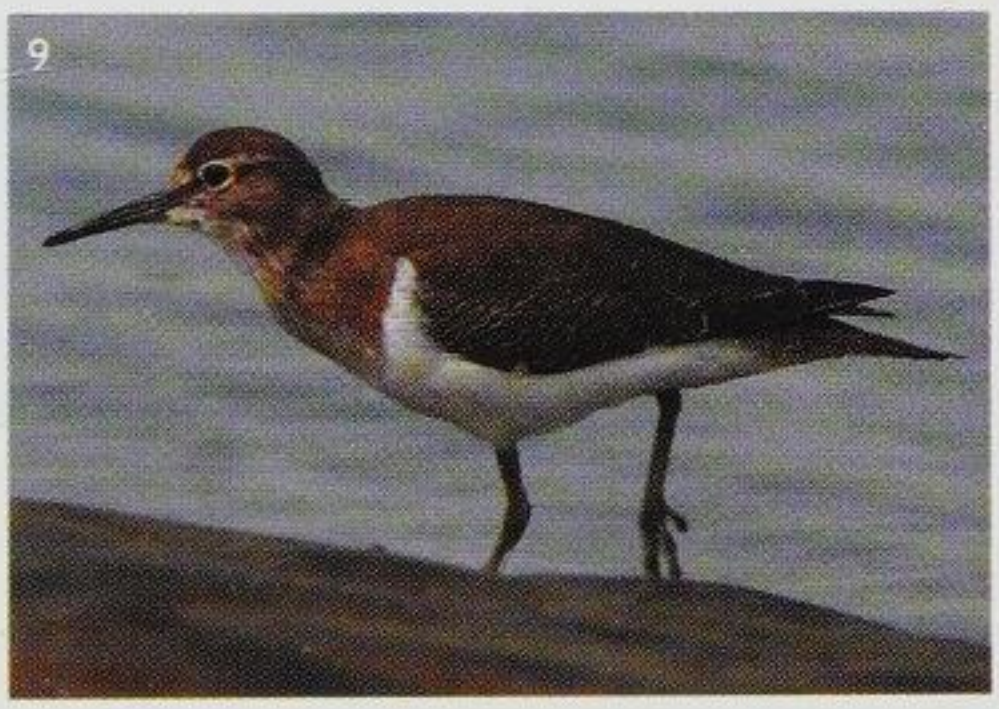
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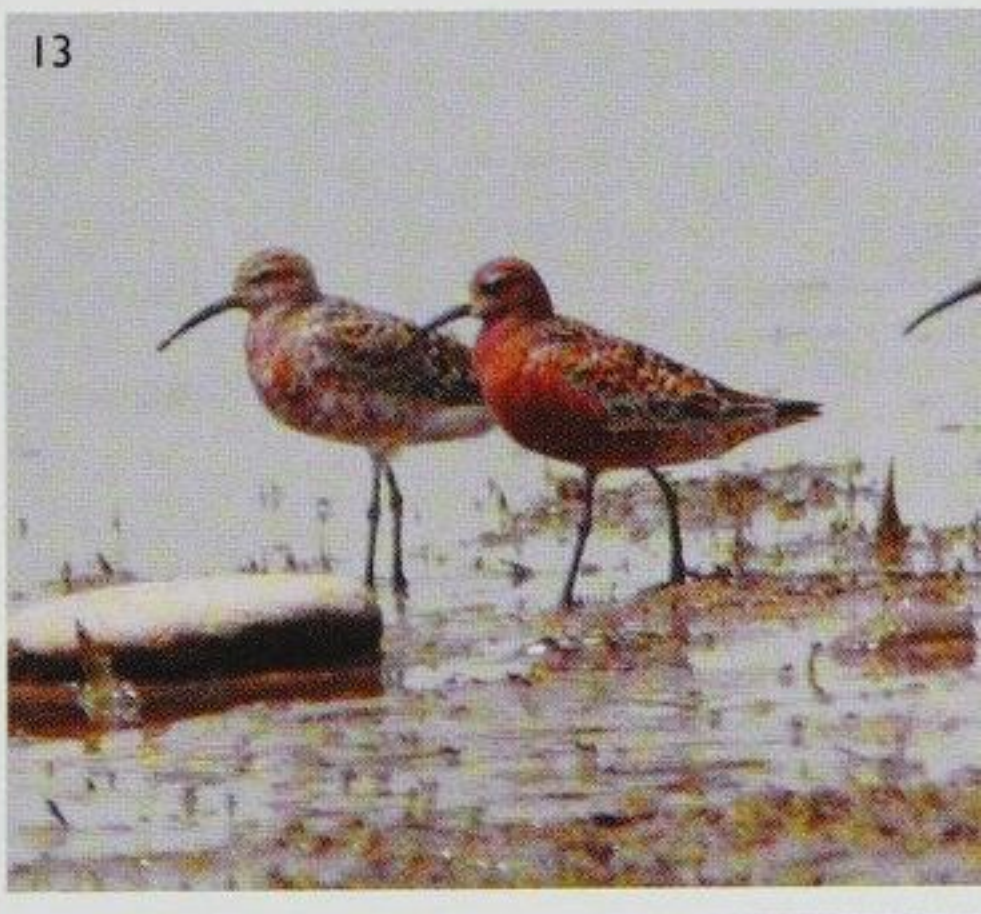
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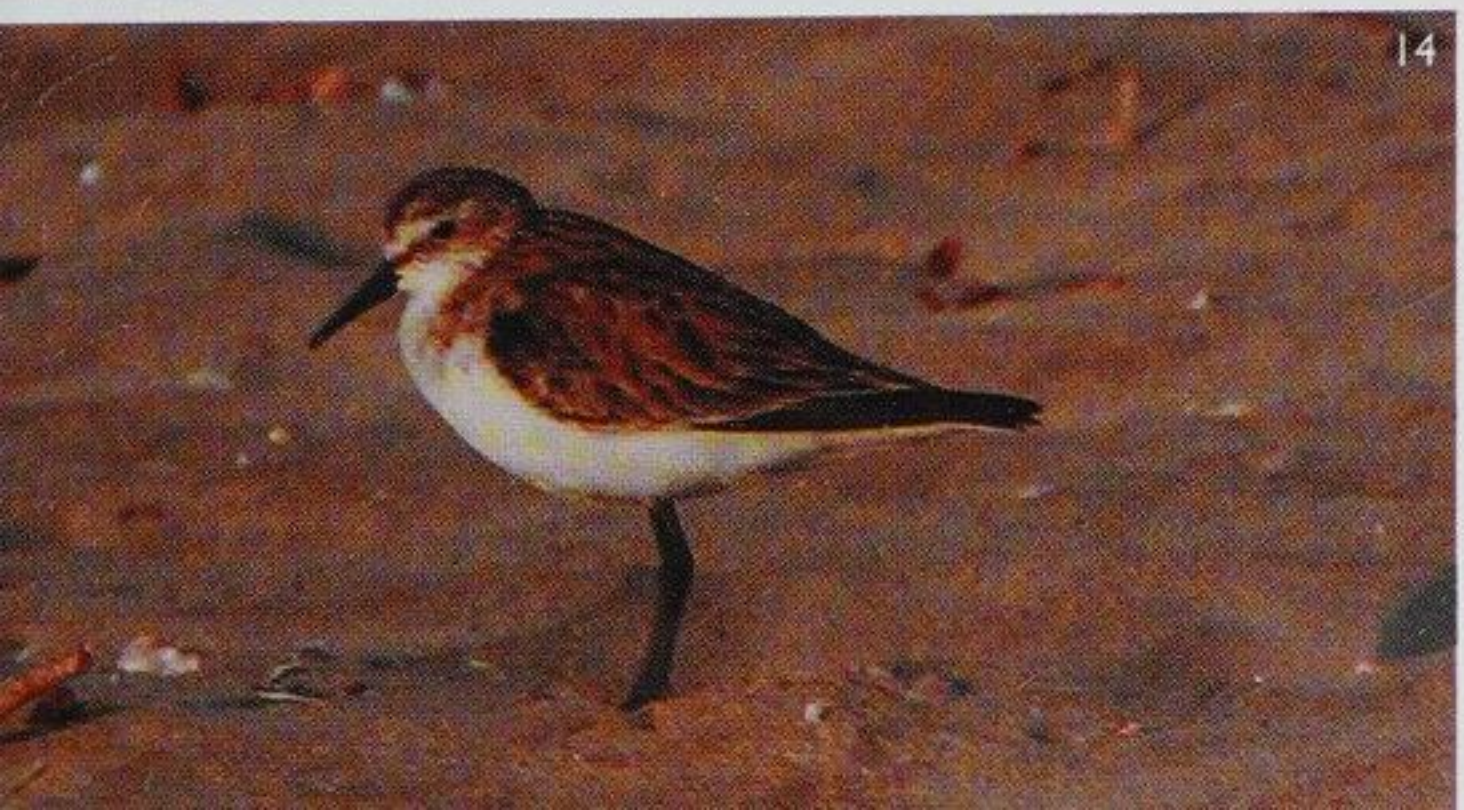
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Terns

River Terns frequent various types of freshwater bodies all over India. Little Egret at right.

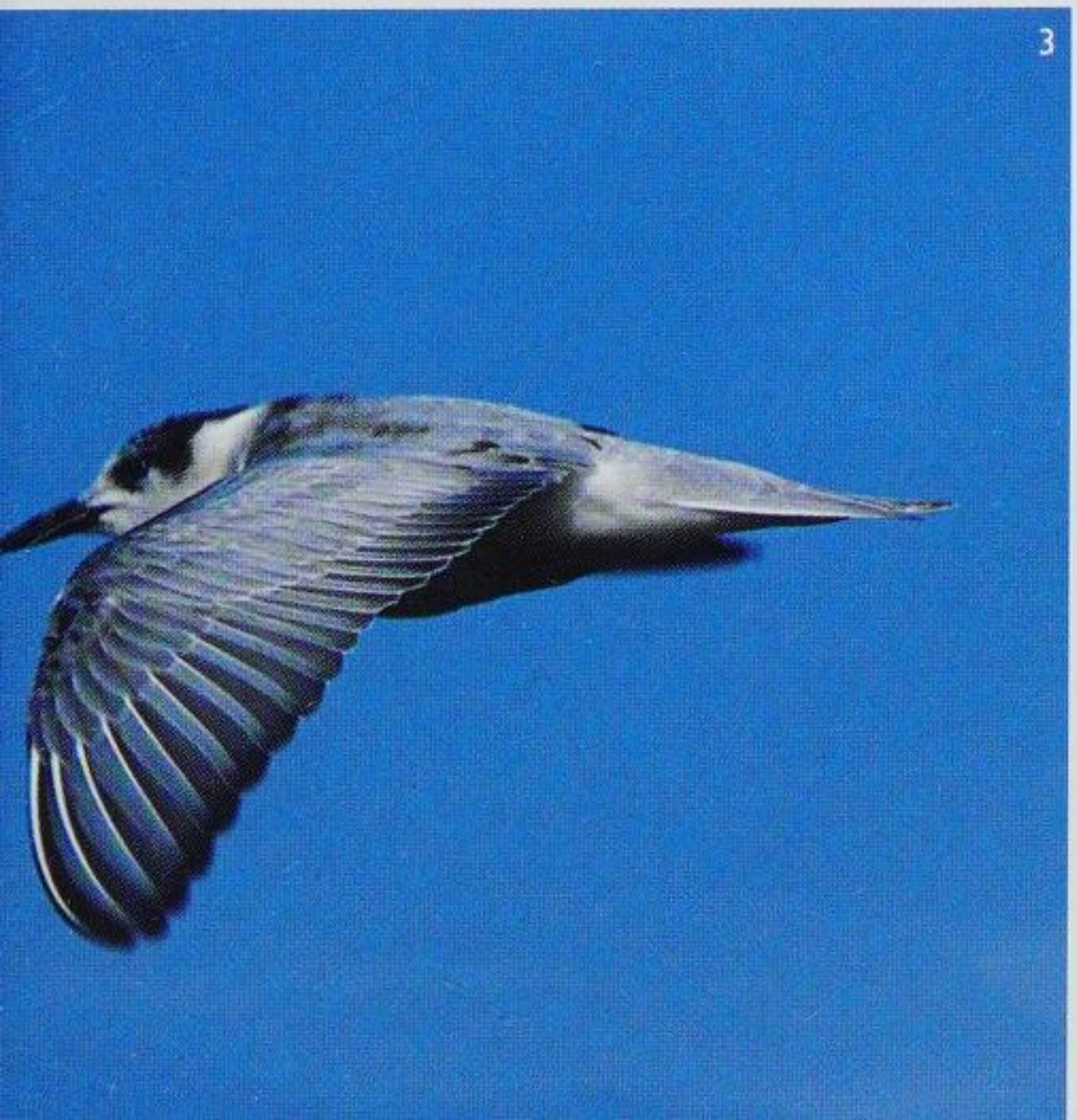
Elegant, gregarious wetland birds related to gulls with slender bodies and long, narrow wings. Terns in gracious flight hunt water bodies for fish.

The **River Tern** (42cm) is the most represented of the larger terns and a common sight in much of India. Adults have long, extended tail feathers, a feature none of the other terns on this page shares. Look for the yellow bill and black, crestless cap. The **Great Crested Tern** (53cm) is large with grey upperparts and heavy cold-yellow bill. It shares its coastal habitat with the **Lesser Crested Tern** (43cm, no photo) that has a finer yellow bill and lighter upperparts. In the same places the similarly sized **Sandwich Tern** (44cm, no photo) is found. Look for the fine yellow-tipped black bill. The huge **Caspian Tern** (51cm, no photo) has a massive red bill. **Gull-billed Terns** (38cm) - though smaller - are heavy-built with thick black bills.

2 Great Crested Terns are seen on the coast of SE and W India.
3 Gull-billed Terns visit the coasts, lakes, rivers and mudflats all over India except C and non-coastal S.
4 Common Terns (see p 77) breed in Ladakh and winter on the coast.

Indian Skimmers breed on islands in rivers and reservoirs in parts of NW, N, and C India.

The **Indian Skimmer** (40cm) is a striking bird that sadly is struggling for survival on the subcontinent. **Black-bellied Terns** (33cm) are similar to the larger River Terns but have black underbellies and orange bills. The **Little Tern** (23cm) is tiny, with a yellow, black-tipped bill. The **Whiskered Tern** (25cm) is a small tern. It is all white in winter with smudges of black behind the eye and on the back crown, remnants of the summer plumage when it has a black cap and when the body is grey apart from the white cheeks. Also, the black bill turns red in summer. Call: a rasping 'kirrrt'. The **Common Tern** (36cm, see photo p 76) is similar to a Whiskered Tern in winter, but always white with extensive black on the crown. The bill is red-to-blackish.



2 Black-bellied Terns visit inland rivers and lakes throughout India, but are now rare.
3 Whiskered Terns are common winter visitors in marshes, on lakes, rivers and the coast throughout India.
4 Little Terns breed along rivers and lakes in parts of the N, and winter on the coast.

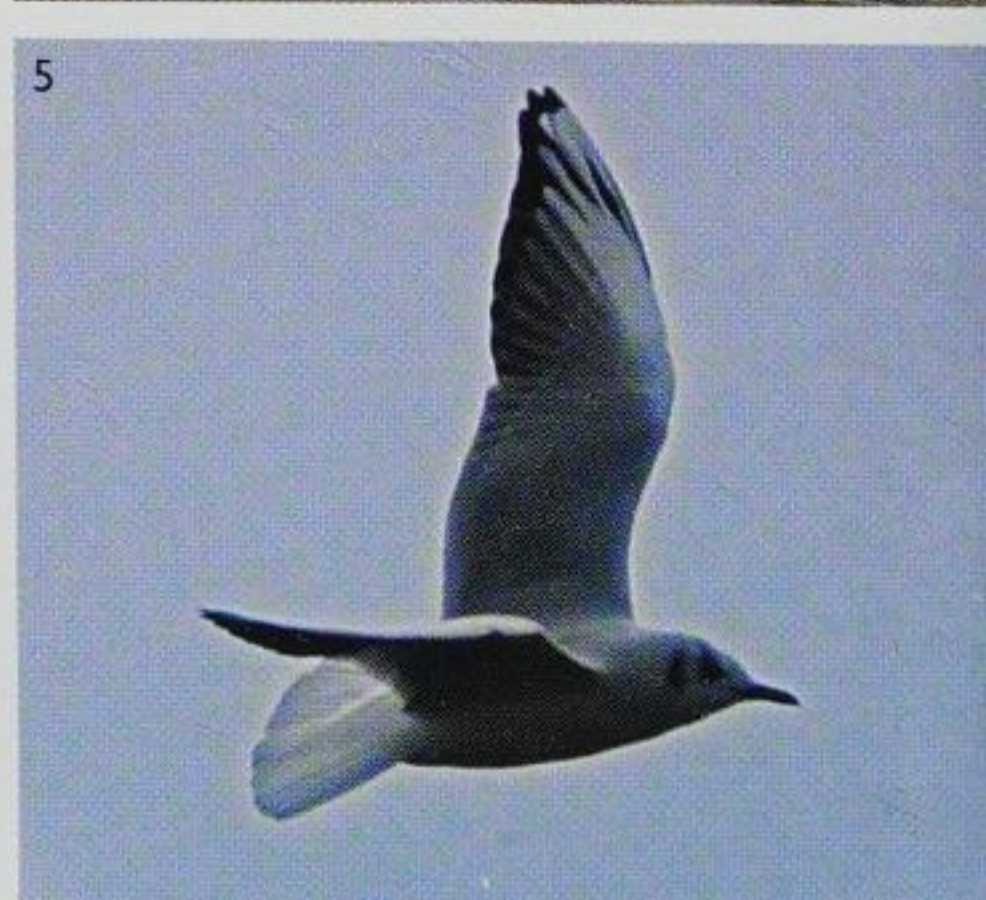
Gulls

Pallas's Gulls visit coasts as well as inland rivers and lakes in the NW.

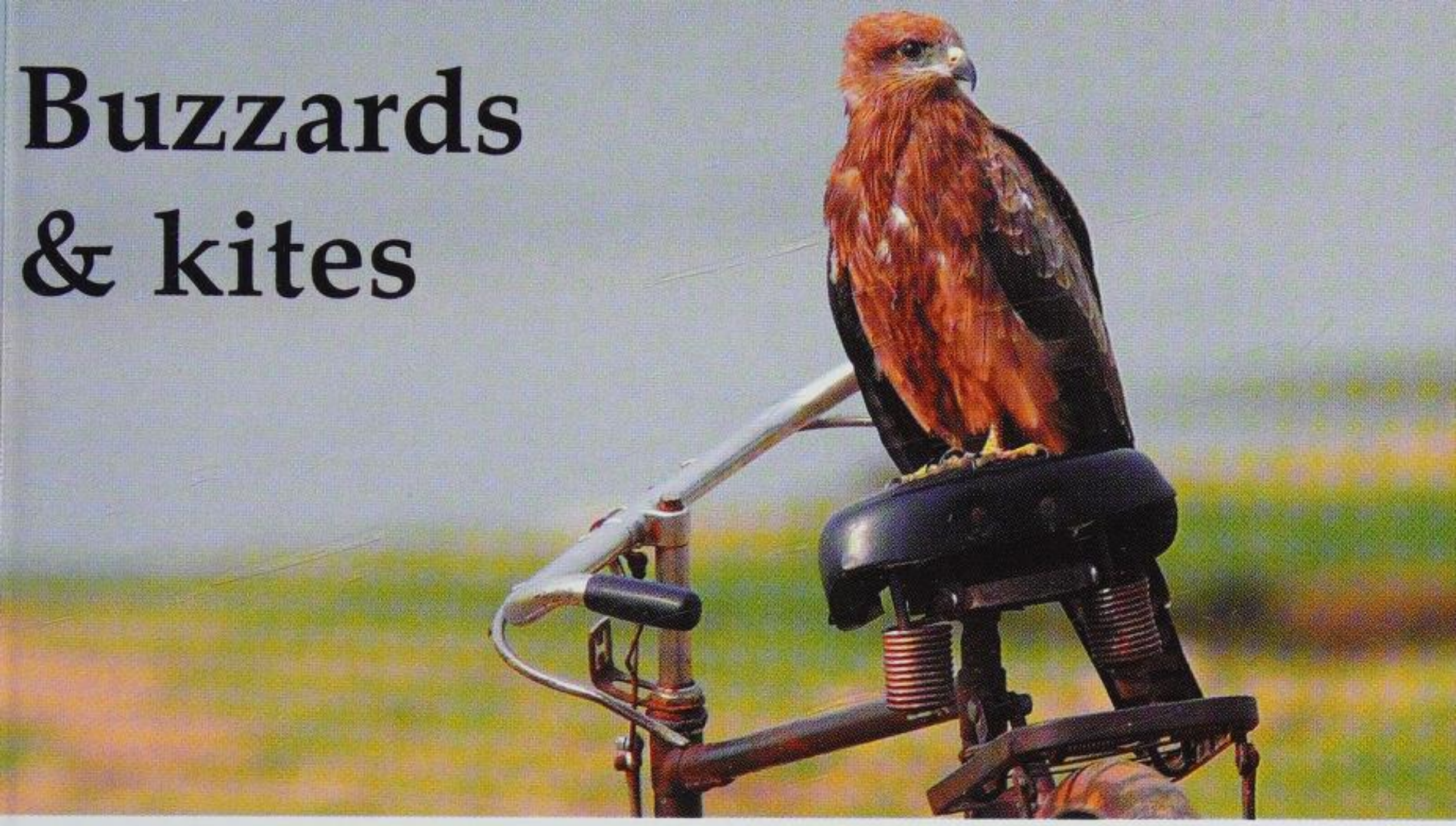
More strongly built than terns, these acrobatic birds seen at seacoasts - and also inland along large water bodies - are gulls. Most species have black wing tips while young birds tend to be mottled brown. They are powerful flyers and feed on fish, often pirating the catch of other birds.

Pallas's Gull (72cm) is India's largest gull, with a heavy yellow bill that has a black and orange band near the tip. The gull's summer black hood is reduced to a large smudge behind the eye in winter. The black wing tips show white dots. The similar **Yellow-legged Gull** (60cm) always has a fully white head. The yellow bill has a red dot on the lower mandible. **Heuglin's Gull** (60cm) is like a darker-backed version of the Yellow-legged, but some races of the latter are darker also. The **Black-headed Gull** (43cm) is smaller, with black edges to the wing tips. The black head turns white in winter. The similar **Brown-headed Gull** (46cm) is larger and the wing tips are black with two white spots. Both have dark red bills. Develops a black-brown hood in summer.

2 Yellow-legged Gulls winter along the coast and inland in the NW.
3 Heuglin's Gulls are largely confined to the coast.
4 Brown-headed Gulls frequent all types of salt and freshwater in N, W, S and E India.
5 Black-headed Gulls have a similar distribution.



Buzzards & kites



Black Kites mainly haunt towns and cities all over the subcontinent.

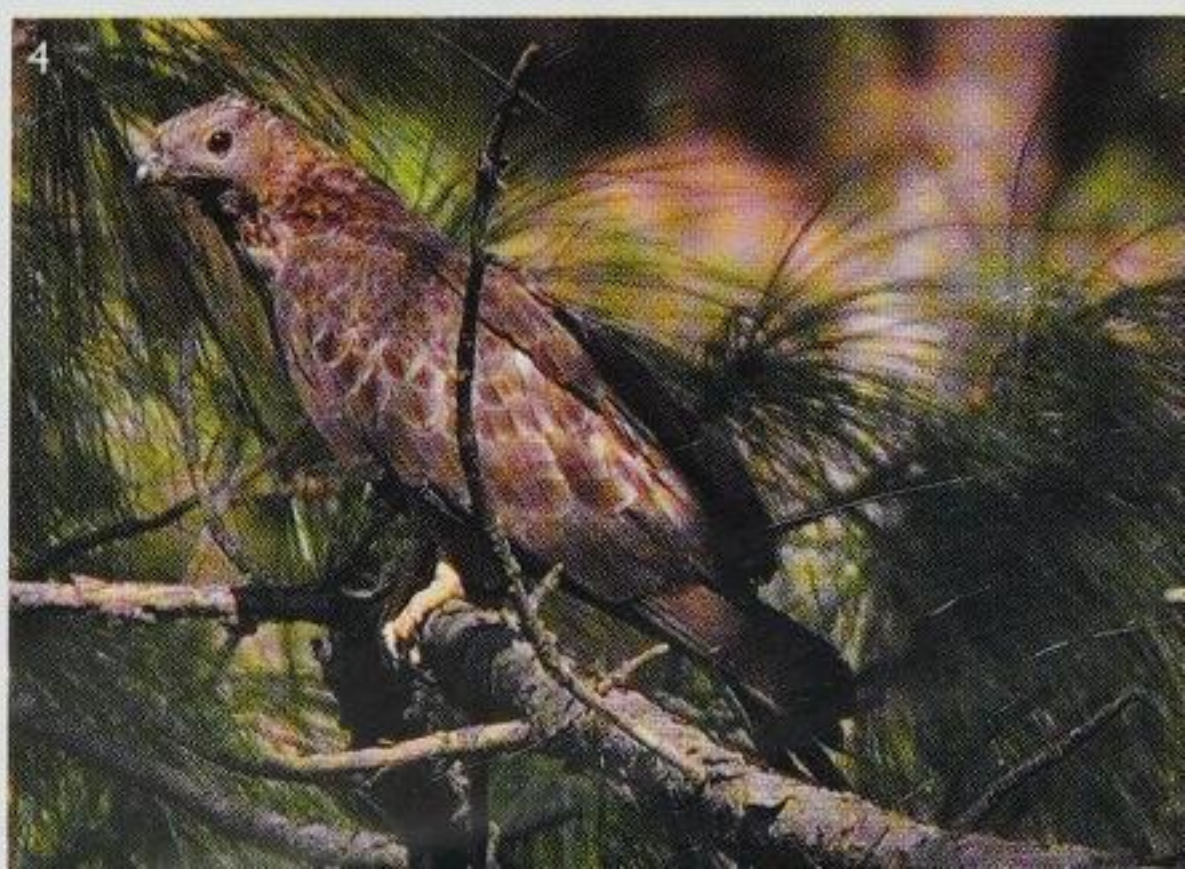
Kites and buzzards feed on carrion but are also capable of catching their own prey. Black Kites are unchallenged in their abundance throughout the subcontinent. Buzzards are stockier, though compared to eagles they are slighter with finer bills.

The **Black Kite** (61cm) is seen literally everywhere, particularly in urban areas, wheeling through the air and making its drawn-out screams and calls. Has a forked tail, apart from birds in moult. The angular wings show prominent light patches at the primaries. The **Brahminy Kite** (48cm) is smaller, warm red-brown with white head and breast and black wing tips. The **Oriental Honey-buzzard** (68cm) is dark brown to yellow-brown. Most important features are two or three dark bands on the light tail and dark lining on light flight feathers. Also notice the small, dove-like head. The **Long-legged Buzzard** (61cm) is the largest and heaviest-built raptor on this page, mostly rufous, but also some dark brown individuals. Wings are held in a 'V' above the body and show dark carpal patches. **Common** (51-56cm, photo p 90) and **Upland Buzzards** (71cm, photo p 90) are rarer and extremely difficult to distinguish from Long-legged Buzzards. The various colour phases within each of the three species are more distinct than the differences between the species.

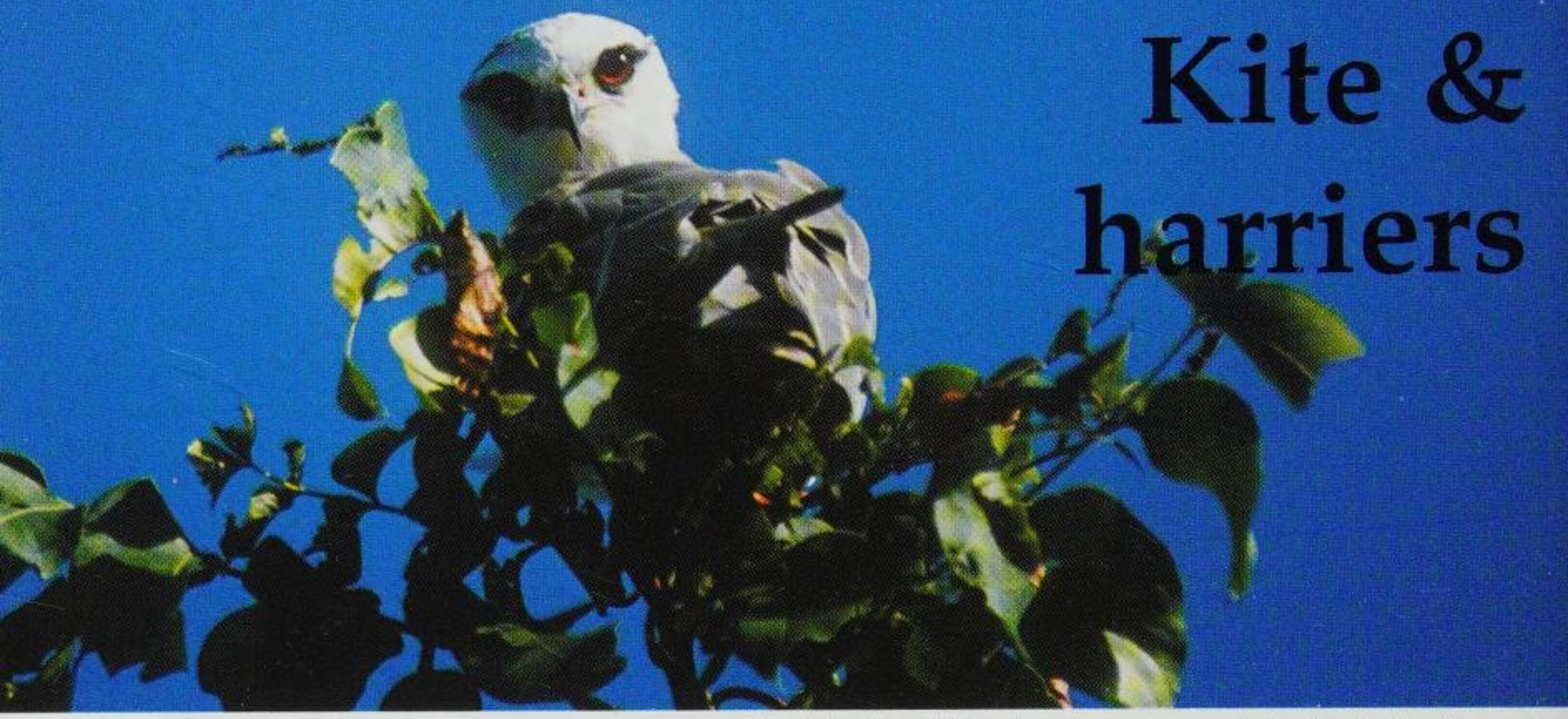
2 Brahminy Kites frequent coasts, rivers and lakes in India except the NW.

3 Oriental Honey-buzzards are residents of all types of forests.

4 Long-legged Buzzards breed in Himalayan forests and winter in open areas and cultivation mainly in NW India. Here in brown-phase.



Black-shouldered Kite & harriers



Black-shouldered Kites breed in open, wooded and agricultural areas.

Harriers are graceful raptors with lively flight, moving fairly low over grasslands and wetlands. The Black-shouldered Kite somewhat resembles a harrier in plumage, but is smaller with narrower, pointed wings and a very large, owl-like head.

The small, grey-and-white **Black-shouldered Kite** (33cm) has a broad, owlish head. Note the grey upperparts and black wing tips. It frequently hovers over its prey, otherwise choosing to perch on poles, electricity wires or exposed branches, its red eyes scanning the various landscapes of India it inhabits. The **Pallid Harrier** (51cm) is the most flamboyant harrier, with a very light, bouncy flight. The male is very light grey with narrow black wing tips. Females are brown with small white rumps. **Montagu's Harriers** (49cm, no photo) are very similar but the male shows one and two dark bands on upper and lower wings respectively. The **Hen Harrier** (46-51cm) is like a Pallid but with broader wings with more extensive black wing tips (male). The **Eurasian Marsh Harrier** (59cm) is the stockiest harrier. Males are brown with grey flight feathers. Females are all brown with yellow throat and crown.

For flight shots of raptors on pp 79-80, see pp 89-90.

2 Pallid Harriers - a male here - hunt open country all over wintering India.
3 Eurasian Marsh Harriers - here a female - winter in marshes and wet grasslands throughout the subcontinent and breed in Kashmir.
4 Hen Harriers - here a female - also visit hilly areas and mainly winter along the Himalayan foothills.

Egyptian Vulture & Lammergeier

Egyptian Vultures frequent towns, villages, rubbish dumps and rocky mountains in much of India and Pakistan.

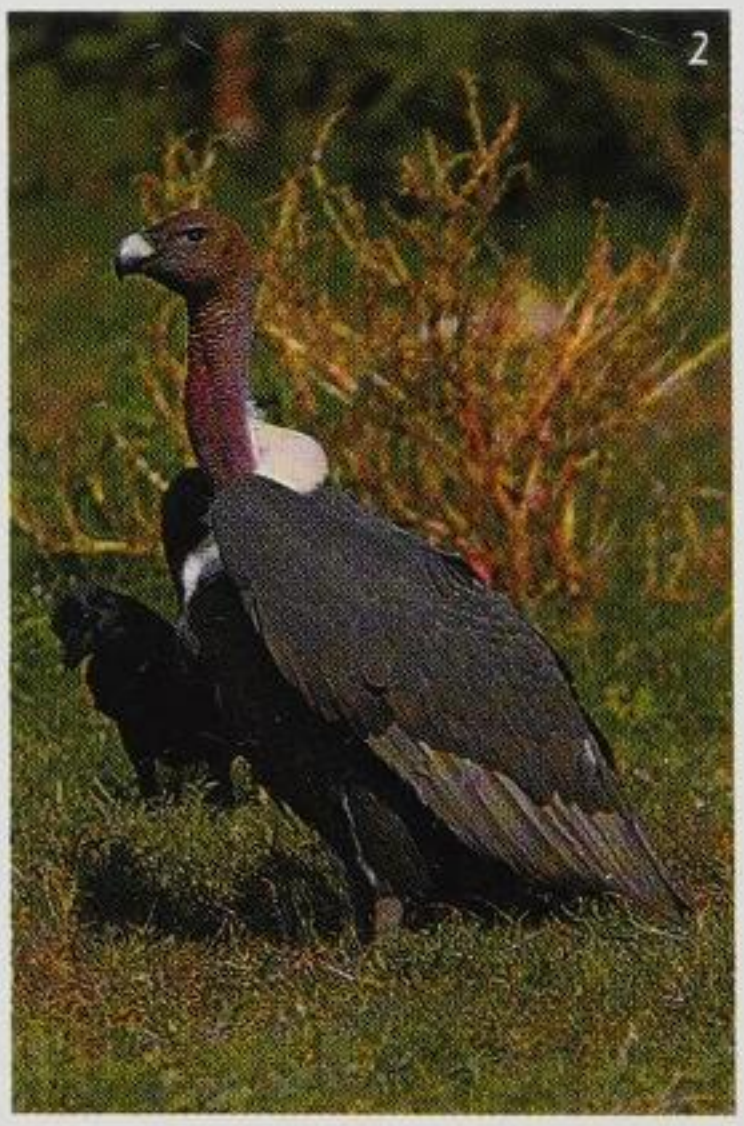
Egyptian Vultures (66cm) are shabby birds, nicknamed 'pharaoh's chickens'. Unlike 'true' vultures their head is entirely feathered. Apart from their yellow bill and leathery face-patch, adult bodies are all white. In flight the black flight feathers are contrasting, but note the white tail. Juveniles are brown, often showing an odd mixture with lighter grey-brown areas. The **Lammergeier** (122cm) of the Himalaya is a huge and unusually shaped raptor, with a very large, wedge-shaped tail and comparatively narrow, pointed wings. Cinnamon-brown below and blackish above. Juveniles are entirely brown.

2 Lammergeiers are masters of the skies of the high Himalaya and never venture lower than 1200m.
3 Immature Egyptian Vulture.
4 Juvenile Lammergeier.

Vultures

White-rumped Vultures are resident throughout the subcontinent but are now rare in most areas.

Vultures are very large, heavy raptors that feed on carrion. Characteristic features are bare neck, short tail and very broad, bulging wings. Vultures gather in large congregations on carcasses to feed. Populations of lowland species have declined dramatically since the mid 1990s.



The **White-rumped Vulture** (90cm) is purple-black with a dark mauve head contrasting with the white neck ruff. Diagnostic in flight are the white forewing in combination with the black leading edge. Flight feathers, body and tail are also black. The **Indian Vulture** (90cm, no photo) is light sandy-brown. The forewings are also light brown when seen from below in flight. The head and neck are distinctly black in adults. Young birds look similar overhead but for the light head and neck. They look like Eurasian Griffons (see p 83) but are lighter sandy-brown, and not rufous. Most of India, but rare in many places. **Slender-billed Vultures** (90cm) are identical but the bill is dark while the neck shows only traces of white down. The **Red-headed Vulture** (85cm) is smaller, more timid and less gregarious than other vultures. It is easily identified with its red head and feet. Adults show diagnostic white on the breast, flank-patches and areas in the wings. Juveniles are brown with a white head and under-belly. For flight shots see p 88.

2 Adult White-rumped Vulture.

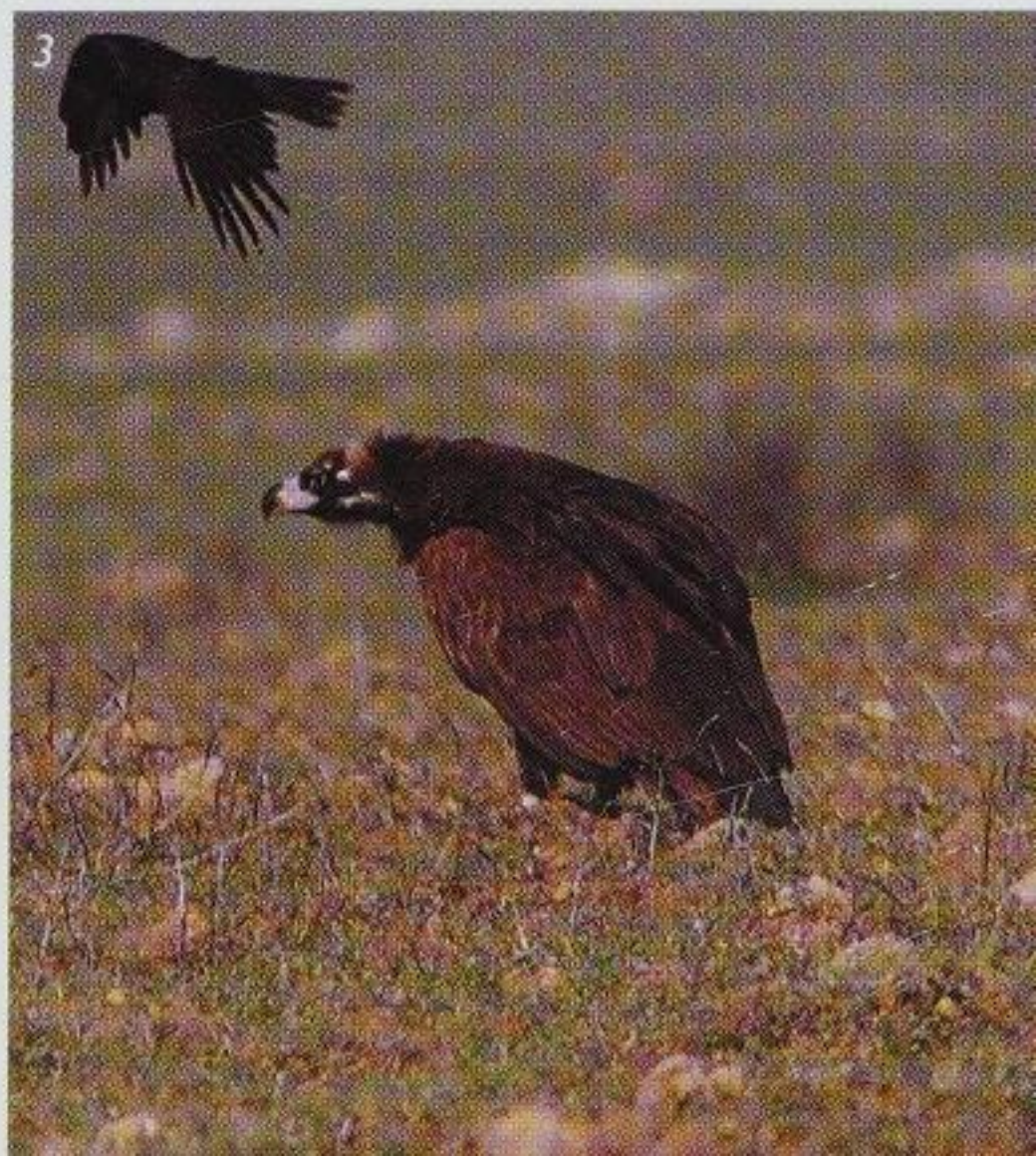
3 Slender-billed Vultures occur in the lower Himalaya.

4 Red-headed Vultures reside in well-forested areas throughout India but are rare in the south.

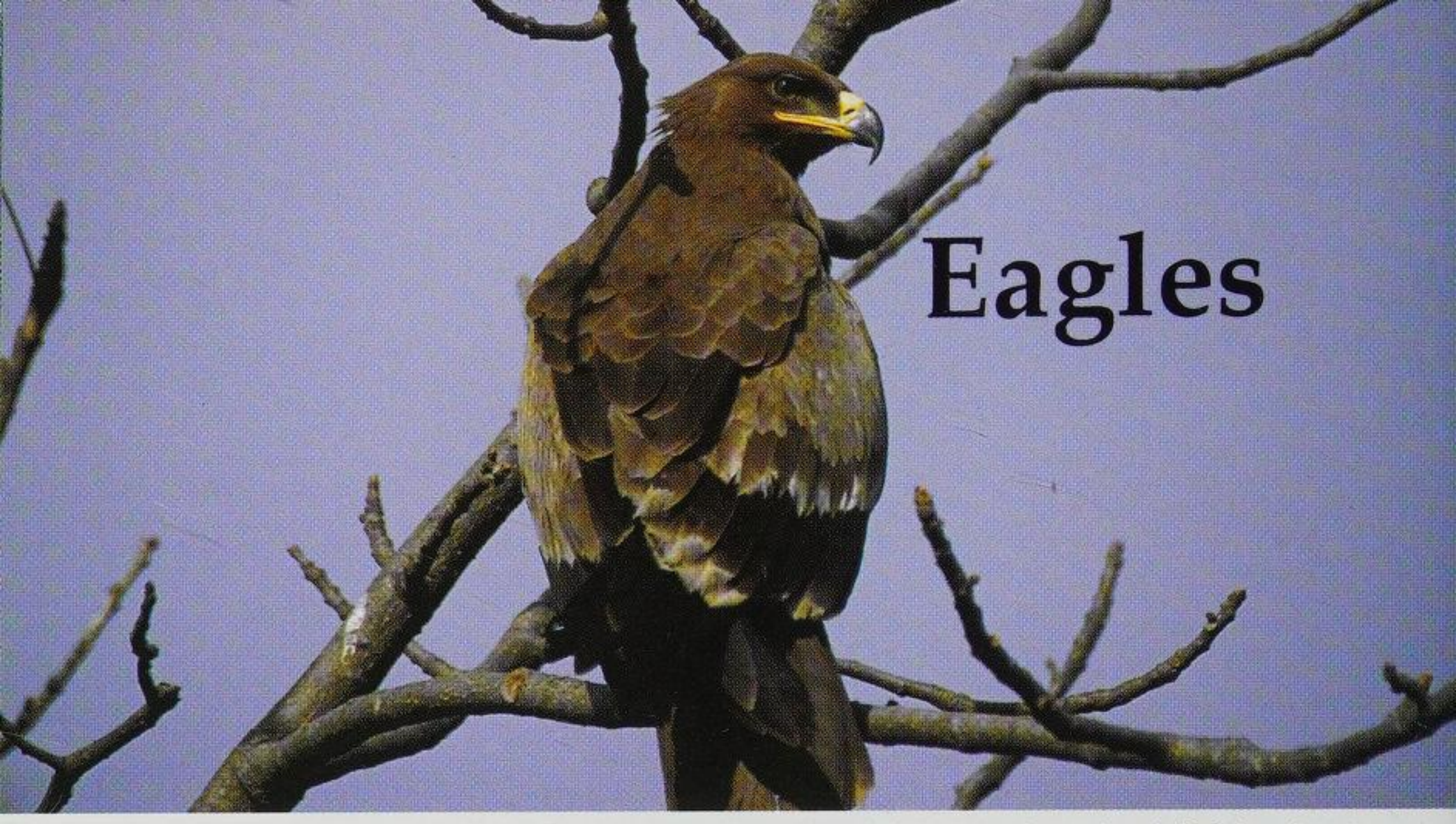
Eurasian Griffons (the bird on the right in the photo, next to a Himalayan Griffon) winter in open country in the NW plains.

The **Himalayan Griffon** (122cm) is a huge, light brown vulture that turns almost white with age. The black tail and flight feathers contrast with the white forewing. Juveniles, like the smaller White-rumped Vulture, are dark brown with two narrow light bands over the dark forewing. The **Eurasian Griffon** (110cm) is very similar, the main difference being the more rufous colour of the body. Also the forewings are warm-brown - not white as in adult Himalayan. Adults have a soft white ruff. Both adults and young birds in flight are warmer brown than Himalayan Griffon, with light buff bands running over the forewings. The **Cinereous Vulture** (110cm) is very large and all black apart from bare pink areas on the head and neck. The only vulture with entirely black underwings - the flight feathers a hint lighter in juveniles. For flight shots see p 88.

2 Himalayan Griffons occur at over 4000m in the Himalaya; lower down in winter. The darker birds in the picture are White-rumped Vultures.
3 Cinereous Vultures winter in small numbers in the NW, mainly along the Himalaya.Here an immature bird is being attacked by a Black Kite (see p 79).



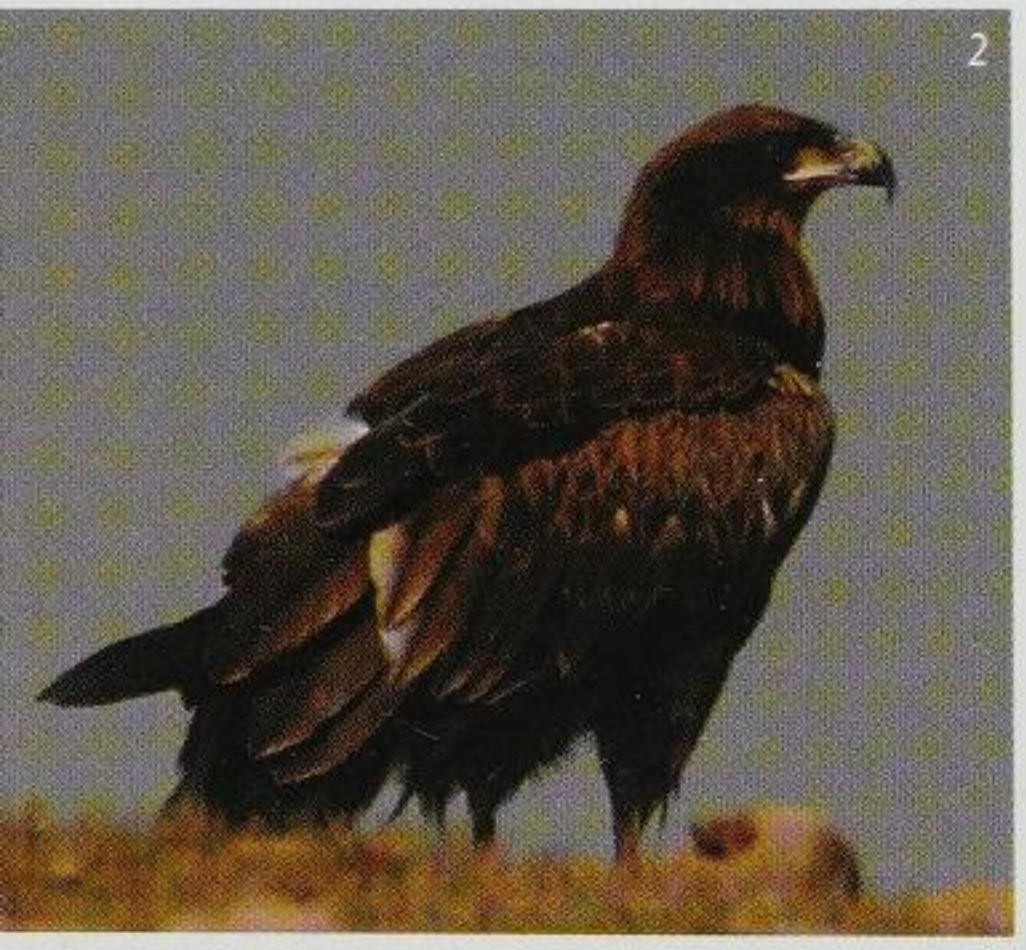
Eagles



Steppe Eagles winter in open and wooded country in the northern half of the subcontinent.

The subcontinent sustains a fine selection of large raptors, many wintering, but resident species on the plains are almost all in decline. Important in identification of different species are the colours of body, wing-coverts, flight feathers and tail, plus the extent of barring and banding. Young birds' plumages may differ considerably from adults'.

The **Steppe Eagle** (76-80cm) is a handsome-brown eagle with fine dark barring on flight feathers and tail that both also have a dark trailing edge. Young birds have white trailing edge and white band over the middle of the wing. Long wings and tail are structural differences with the spotted eagles. The similar **Tawny Eagle** (63-71cm) lacks barring and white bands. A typical creamy phase shows dark flight feathers contrasting with light coverts. The **Greater Spotted Eagle** (64-74cm) is darker and stockier. No barring but light 'commas' at the wrists of the underwings. The **Indian Spotted Eagle** (61-66cm, see photo p 89) is similar but dark flight feathers contrast with light wing-coverts. **Golden Eagles** (90-100cm) are warm-brown with golden crown and hind-neck. Immatures have white wing-patches and white tail with black band. Wings bulge at the trailing edge, narrowing near the body. The long-tailed **Imperial Eagle** (81-90cm, no photo) also has a yellow crown and neck and winters in small numbers in NW India. For flight shots see p 89.



2 Tawny Eagles prefer semi-desert and dry cultivation in much of India apart from S and NE.

3 Greater Spotted Eagles visit swamps and lakes in N India in winter.

4 Golden Eagles occur in the high Himalaya to heights over 4500m.

Booted Eagles breed in forests in the NW Himalaya and winter in open and wooded areas over much of India.

The **Booted Eagle** (50-54cm) is India's smallest eagle. The dark phase looks very much like a Black Kite, also with a light area in the primary flight feathers. Note the fine, unforked tail though. Diagnostic are the light shoulder-patches, described as its 'headlights'. The light phase is white with dark flight feathers. The wings of **Bonelli's Eagle** (68-72cm) are 'pinned in' at the base like the eagles of the next page. They are brown above and light below, with light forewing, dark central coverts and lighter flight feathers. Juveniles very light below in flight. The **Crested Serpent Eagle** (74cm) is rufous-brown, spotted with grey below and a black crown which is also spotted. In flight note the very broad wings with warm-brown coverts and white tail and flight feathers, each with a dark line and a broader dark trailing edge. The **Short-toed Snake Eagle** (68cm) is brown with white underparts, mottled with brown. Seen in flight from below looks almost white apart from fine dark lining. The large, owlish head is often brown. For flight shots see p 89.

2 Crested Serpent Eagles - here a sub adult - inhabit wooded country in most of India apart from NW desert areas.
3 Bonelli's Eagles are found in forests and wetlands.
4 Short-toed Snake Eagles reside in much of India and frequent open and dry areas.

Mountain Hawk Eagles breed in mountain forests in N and S India.

The crested **Mountain Hawk Eagle** (72cm) is brown below with light bars on the belly. Juveniles have light bodies. The underwings are light with narrow barring and the tail has three narrow bands. Wings bulge out strongly along the trailing edge, and are 'pinned in' at the body. **Changeable Hawk Eagles** (70cm) are similar but show more streaking on the breast and less barring on the belly. Less extensive dark lining on the flight feathers. An all-dark phase is similar to the Black Eagle but has light flight feathers. The small **Rufous-bellied Eagle** (53-61cm) is rufous-brown with white throat and upper breast, and blackish head and upperparts. Underwing-coverts also rufous; flight feathers white with narrow dark trailing edge; juveniles are fully white seen from below apart from some dark along the flanks. The **Black Eagle** (69-81cm) is black apart from some fine white lining on tail and flight feathers. The wings are narrow near the body and broaden towards the tip in a straight line, not bulging in the middle of the body as in other species. A juvenile is dark on the upperparts but has white on throat and underwings. For flight shots see p 89.

2

3

2 Changeable Hawk Eagles mostly visit well-wooded areas in C and S India.

3 Rufous-bellied Eagles are found in tropical forests in NE and SW India.

4 Black Eagles prefer thick forest, hawking over the treetops in the mountains of N, S and E.

4

Osprey & fish eagles

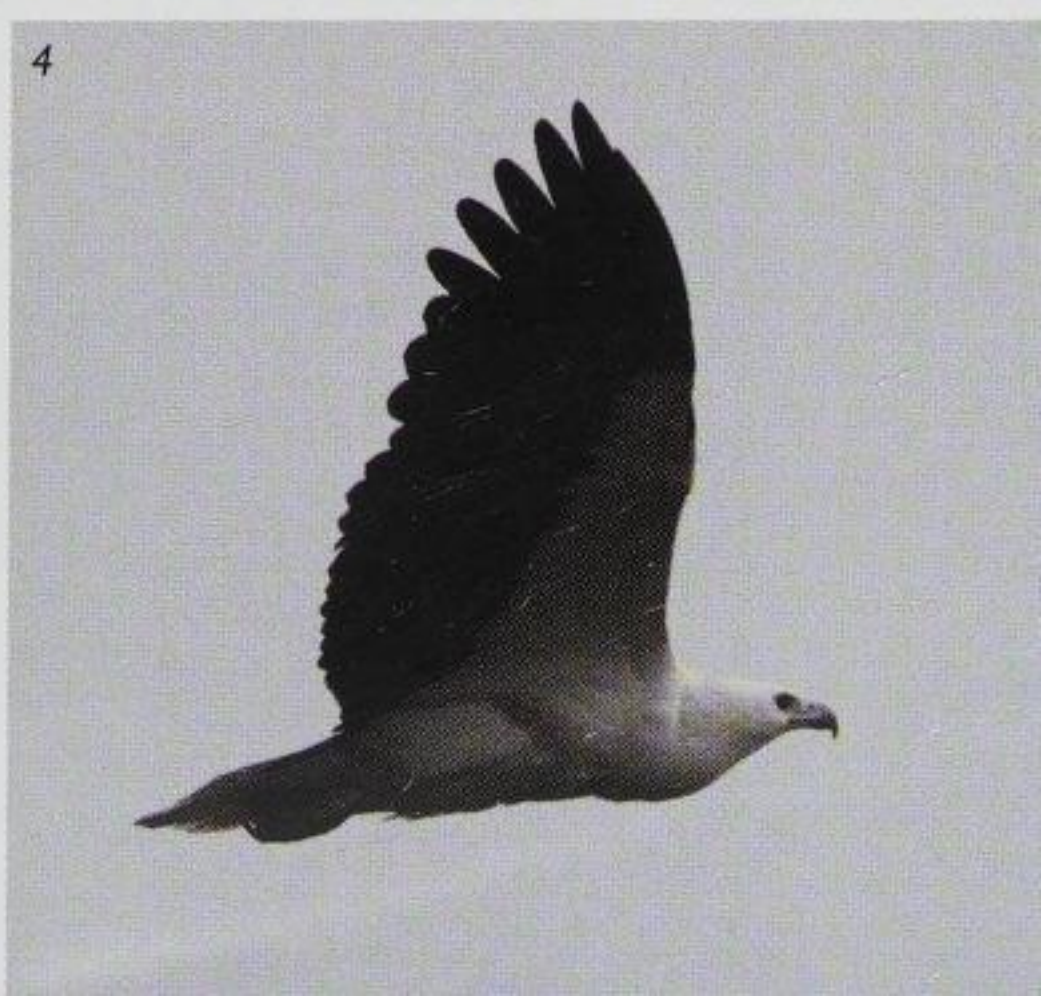
Ospreys winter over most of India apart from C and are found at lakes and rivers and sometimes on the coast.

Middle-sized raptors found near water bodies where they feed on fish. Most have diagnostic plumages and tail patterns, but be vigilant for juvenile Egyptian Vultures, Red-headed Vultures and Brahminy Kites.

The **Osprey** (56cm) is a smallish eagle with sharply angled wings. It is largely white below with chocolate-brown through the eye to the rest of the upperparts. The **White-bellied Sea Eagle** (66-71cm) is grey with a white head and underparts. The tail is white with a dark base. **Pallas's Fish Eagle** (76-84cm) is deep brown with a lighter head and diagnostic dark wings and tail with a white band. The **Grey-headed Fish Eagle** (74cm) has a brown breast-band, white belly and grey head. The white tail ends in a dark band. The similar but rare **Lesser Fish Eagle** (no photo) has an all-dark tail and is greyer on the breast and upperparts. For flight shots see p 90.

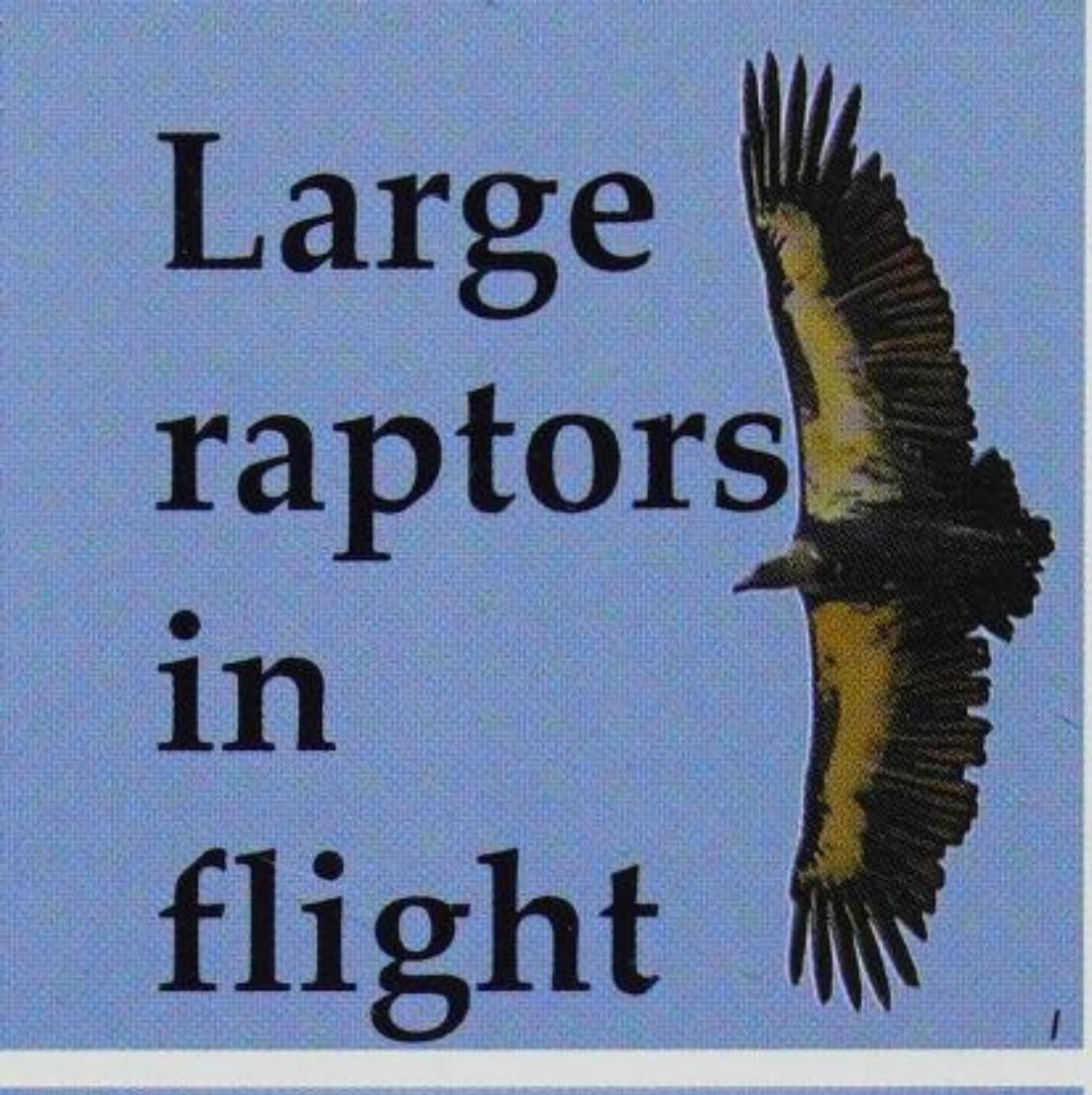
2 Grey-headed Fish Eagles are seen near large lakes and rivers in wooded country mainly in the NE and the C Himalaya.

3 Pallas's Fish Eagles frequent the rivers, lakes and marshes of N India apart from most of the NW.



4 White-bellied Sea Eagles are resident along the coast and estuaries of W, S and E India.

Large raptors in flight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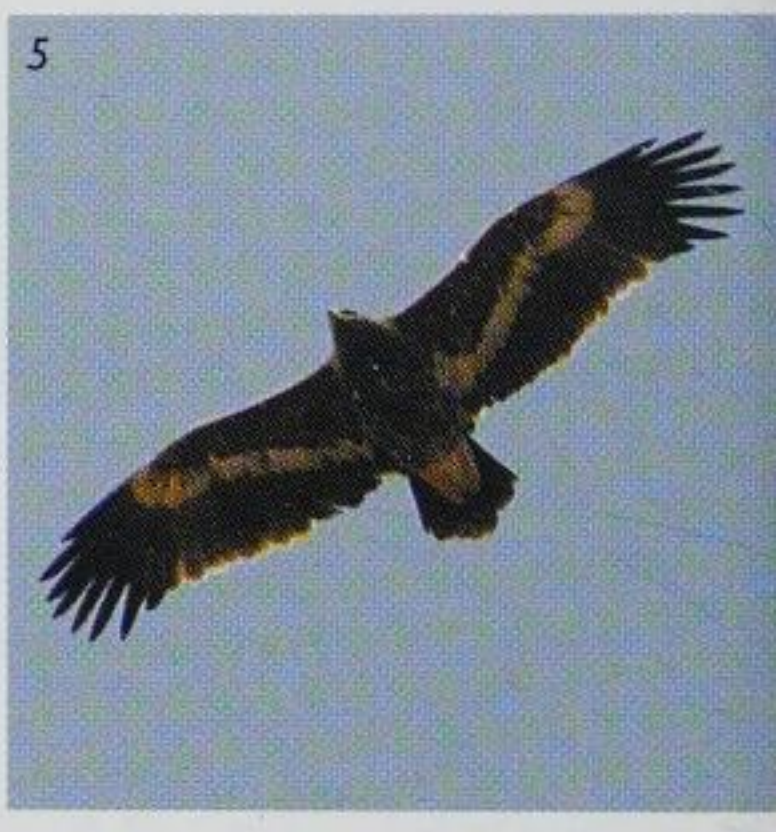
1 White-rumped Vulture.
2 White-rumped Vulture (immature).
3 Cinereous Vulture (juvenile).
4 Slender-billed Vulture.
5 Steppe Eagle (immature).
6 Himalayan Griffon.
7 Red-headed Vulture.
8 Red-headed Vulture (immature).
9 Eurasian Griffon (right, with a juvenile Steppe Eagle).
10 Himalayan Griffon (juvenile).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1 Steppe Eagle.
2 Tawny Eagle.
3 Greater Spotted Eagle.
4 Indian Spotted Eagle.
5 Bonelli's Eagle (immature).
6 Black Eagle.
7 Booted Eagle.
8 Eurasian Marsh Harrier (female).
9 Booted Eagle (light phase).
10 Mountain Hawk Eagle.
11 Bonelli's Eagle.
12 Hen Harrier (female).
13 Short-toed Snake Eagle.
14 Golden Eagle (juvenile).
15 Crested Serpent Eagle.

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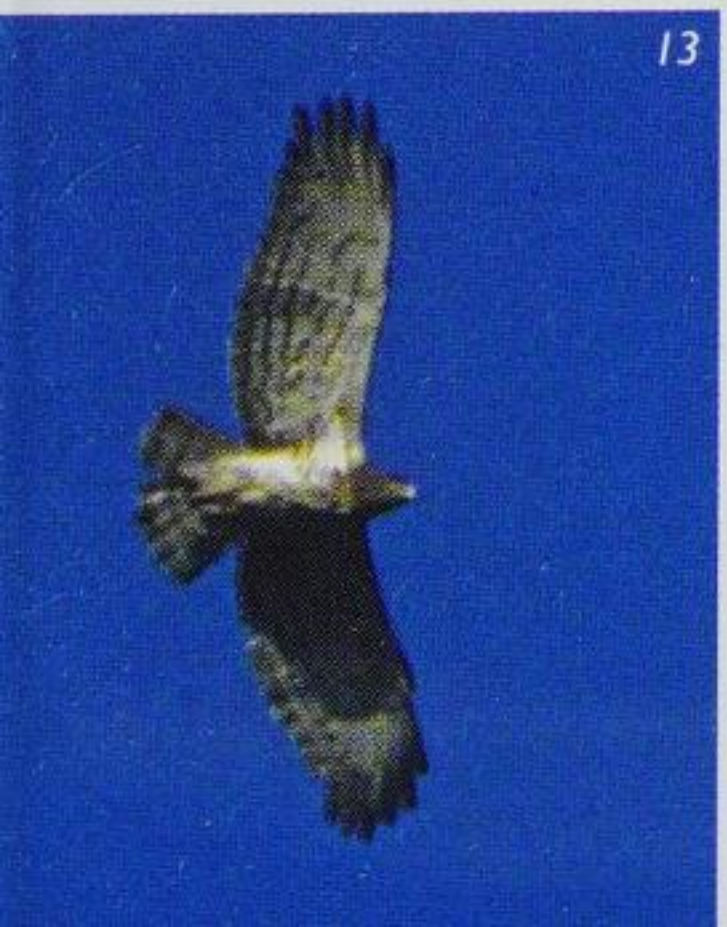
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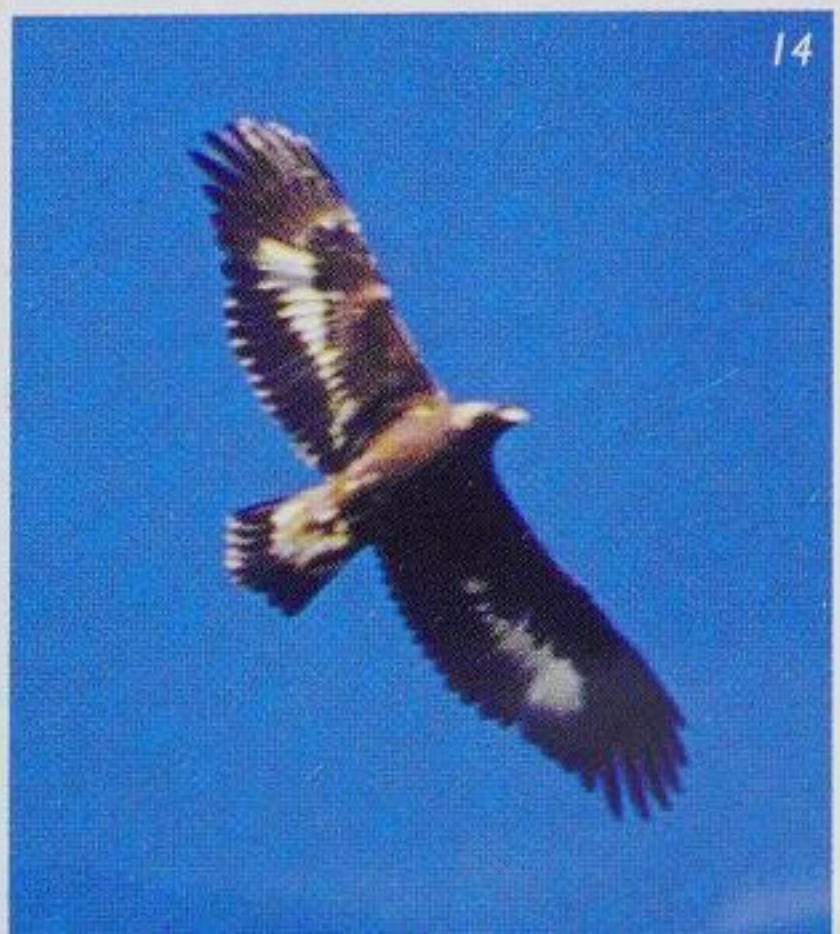
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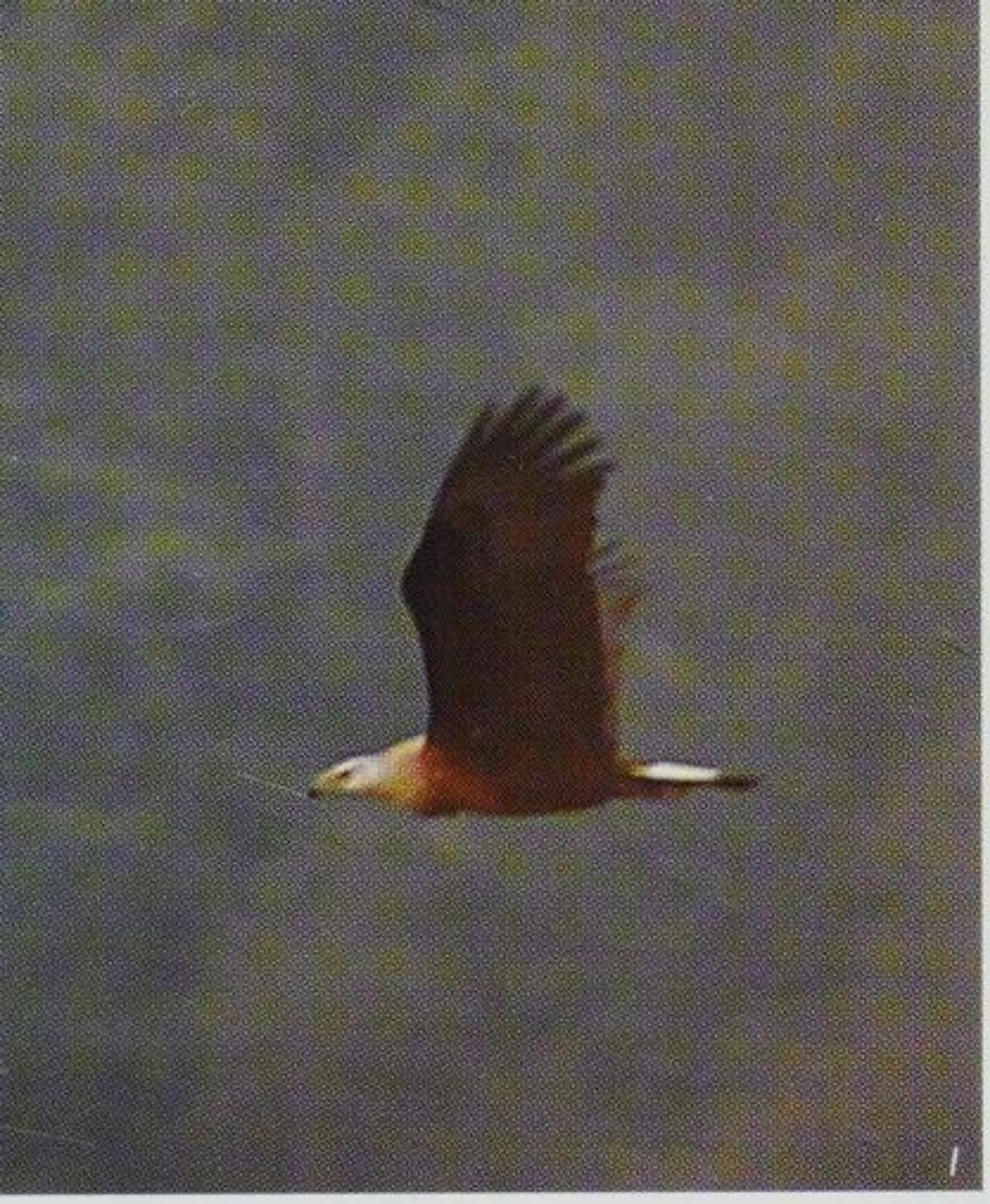
Raptors in flight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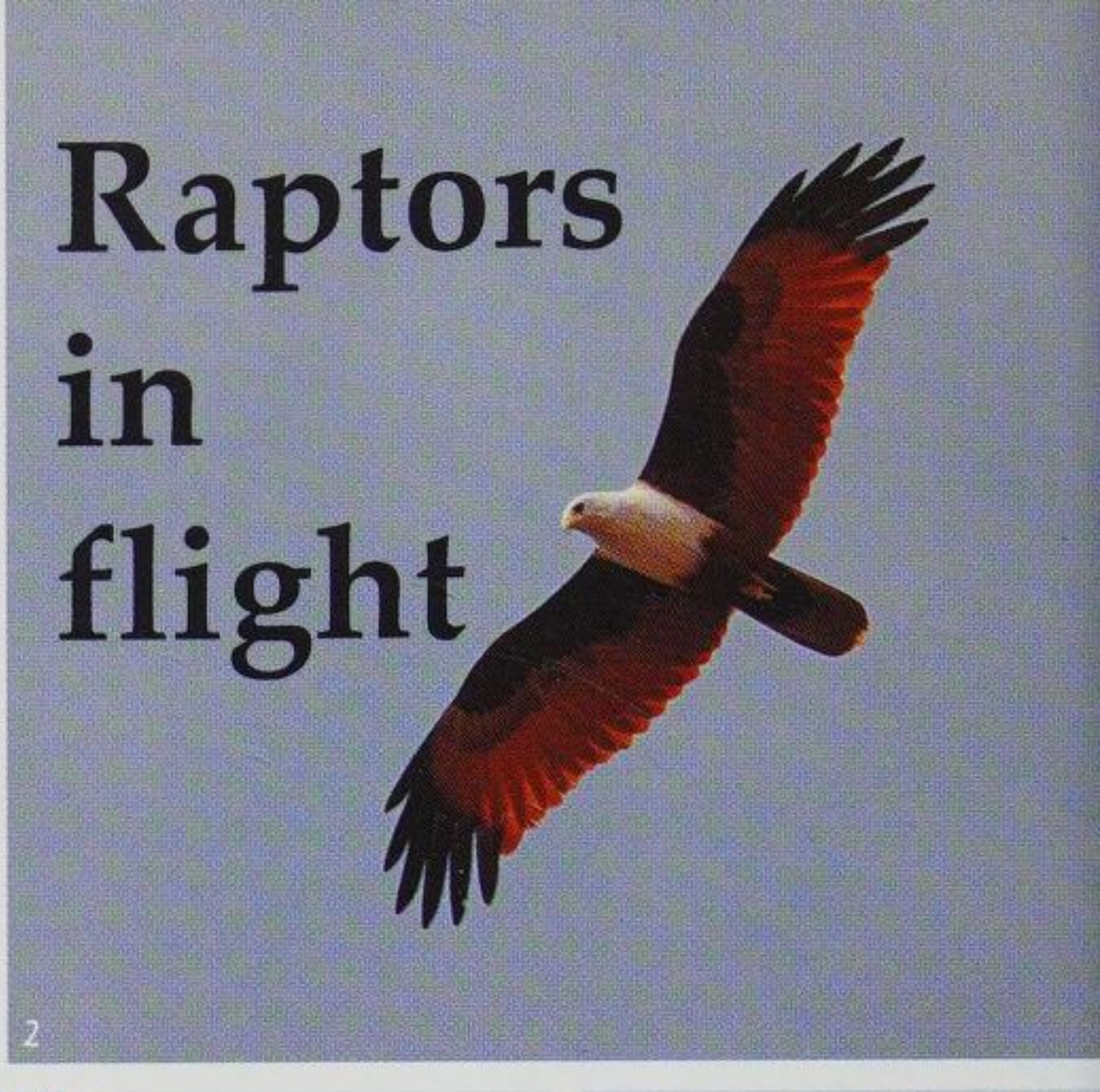
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1 Pallas's Fish Eagle.
2 Brahminy Kite.
3 Common Buzzard.
4 Long-legged Buzzard (with a Black Kite).
5 White-eyed Buzzard (immature).
6 Shikra (immature).
7 Upland Buzzard.
8 Grey-headed Fish Eagle.
9 Black-shouldered Kite.
10 Black Kite.
11 Oriental Honey-buzzard.

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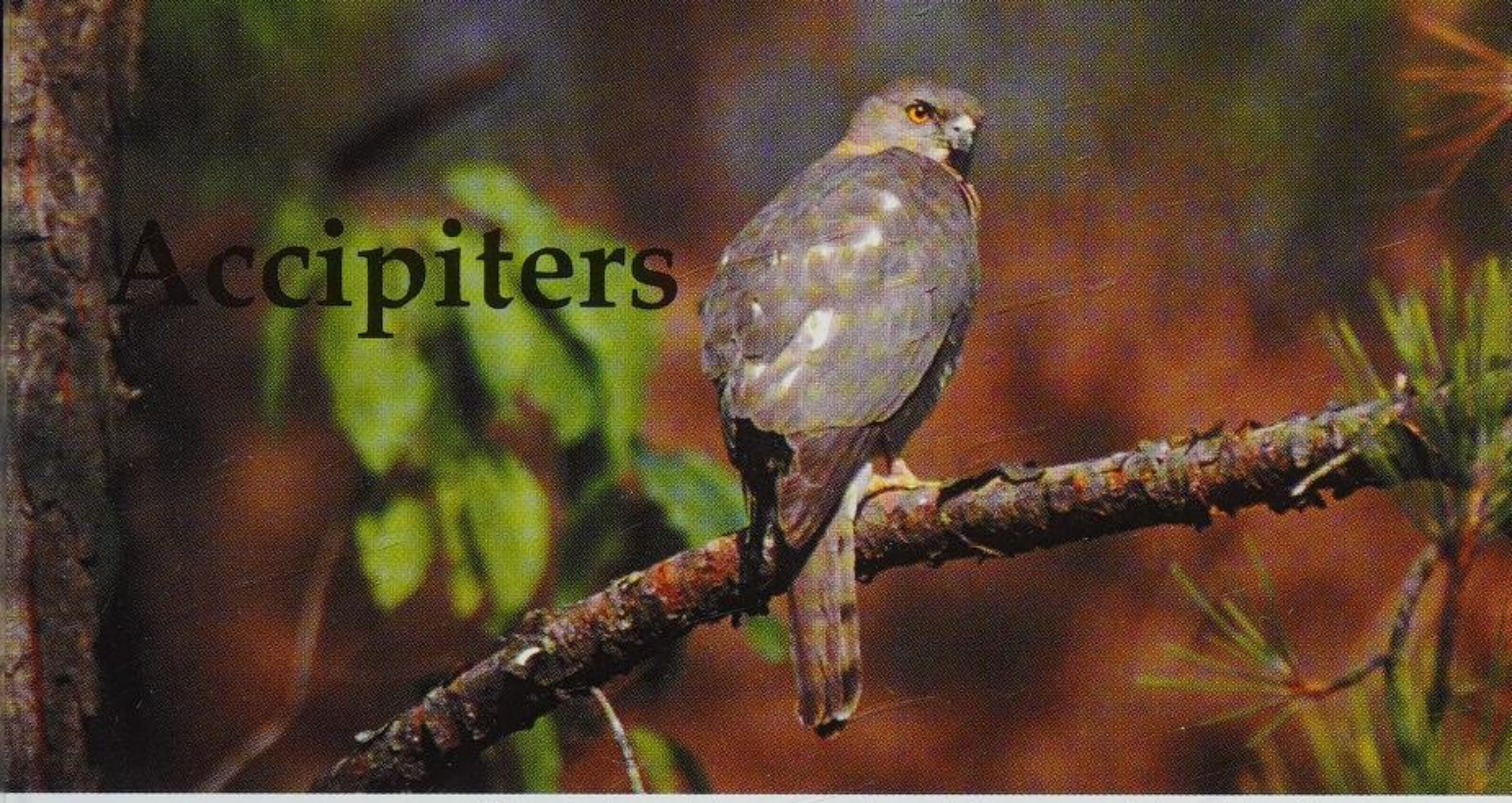
Accipiters



Shikras live in wooded country, gardens and village groves all through the subcontinent.

Small raptors with short, rounded wings and long tails. They pursue prey in dashing flights.

The **Shikra** (31cm) is one of India's commonest raptors, light in appearance, with grey upperparts and finely orange-barred breast. The tail has four bands. In flight the underwings are light with a hint of orange on the coverts and some fine bars on the flight feathers. Juveniles are light brown with streaked underparts. The **Eurasian Sparrowhawk** (31-36cm) is darker grey above with orange cheeks, white supercilium and orange barring on the chest in males. Females and juveniles are barred dark below. Flight feathers show dark lines. The even darker **Besra** (31-36cm) has orange streaking on breast and barring on belly. Broad dark stripe along throat is diagnostic, but note a narrow throat-stripe on immature Shikras. Three tail-bands. The **Crested Goshawk** (40-46cm, no photo) of the NE and SW is streaked on breast like a Besra but the markings are chocolate-brown and the bird is larger and with short crest. **Northern Goshawks** (50-61cm, no photo) are large with densely barred underparts and a broad white supercilium. They winter in W Himalaya; breed in C Himalaya. The **White-eyed Buzzard** (43cm) is not an accipiter, but can resemble a Shikra. The tail appears light from below and chest and belly are brown barred with some white. Note thick black moustache and throat-stripe.

2

2 Breeding in Himalayan forests, Eurasian Sparrowhawks are occasionally found wintering in the plains as well.
3 Besras breed in the thick hill forests of the lower Himalaya and the W Ghats.
4 White-eyed Buzzards are found in open areas over most of India.

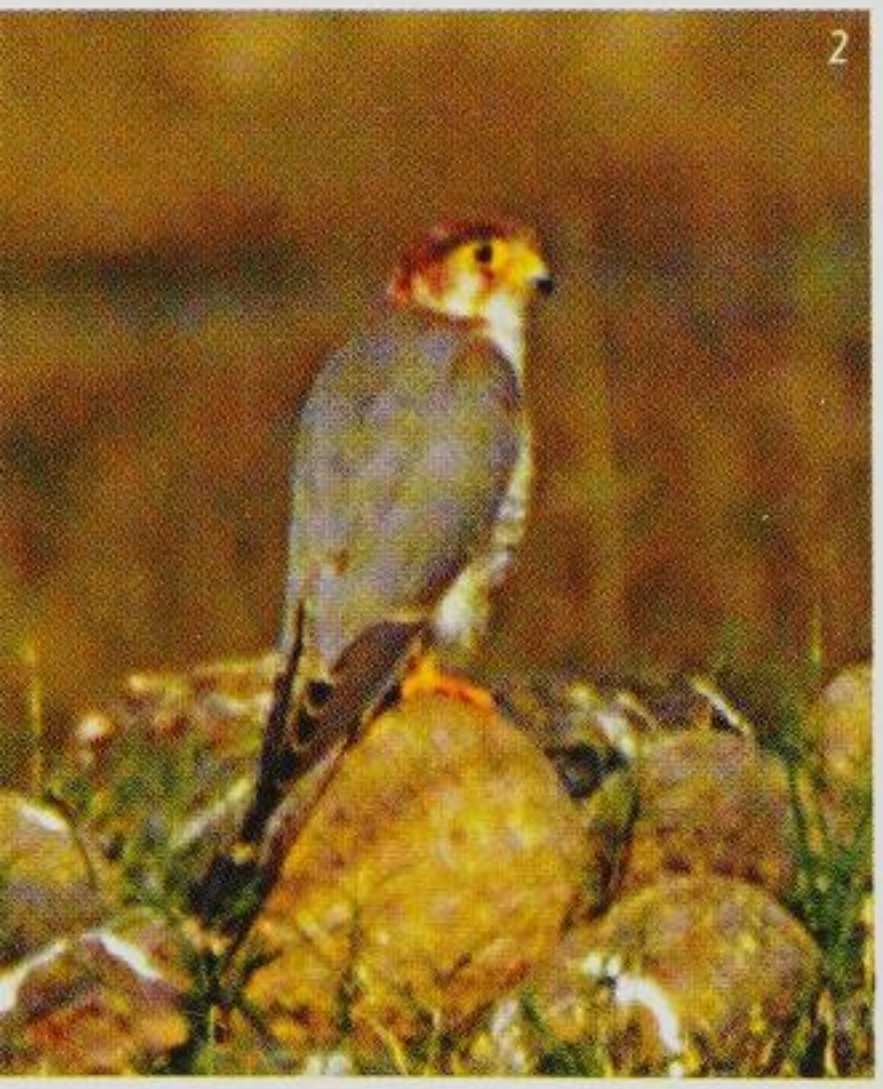
4

Falcons

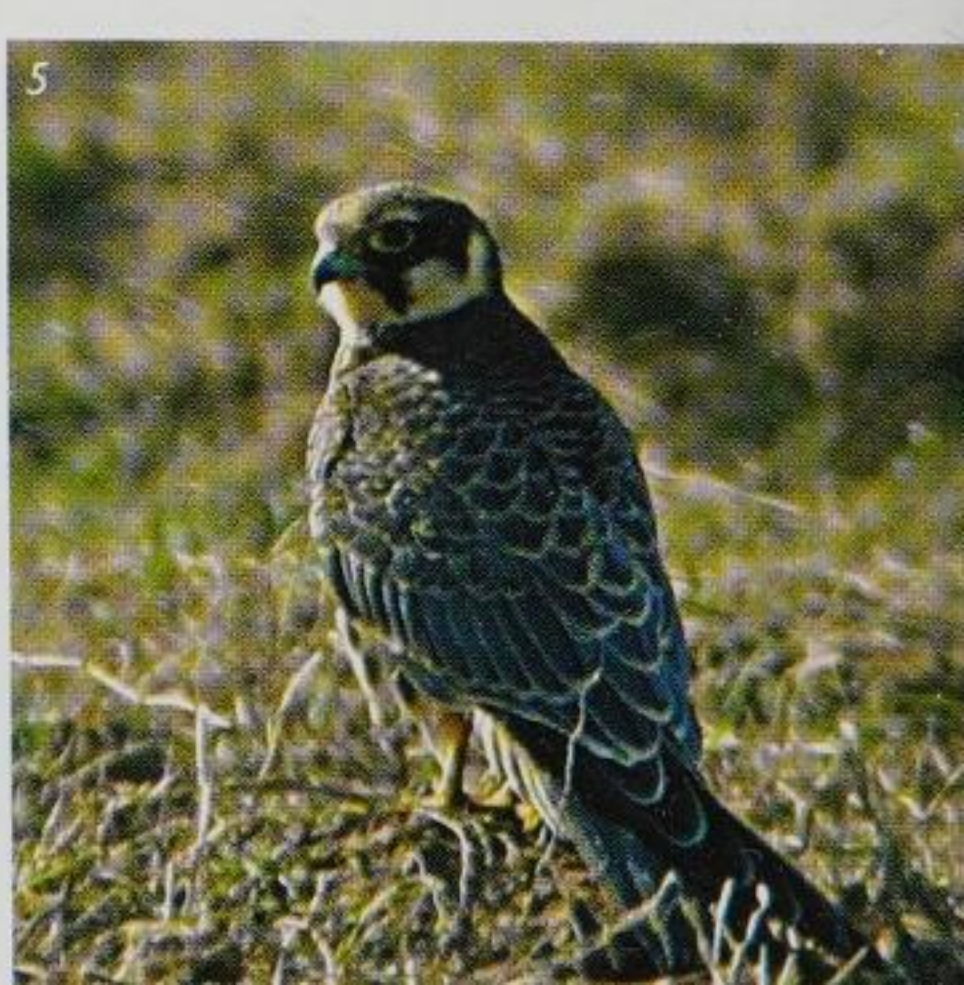
Common Kestrels visit all types of open country. They breed in the Himalaya and W Ghats and winter throughout India.

Long-tailed, slim raptors with long, pointed wings used in powerful flight.

The **Common Kestrel** (36cm) is seen hovering in the sky or perched looking for prey. Males have brick red upperparts dotted with black. The tail and head are grey with dark moustache and black tail-band. Females are brown, spotted with black above and streaked below. The **Red-necked Falcon** (36cm) is light grey, finely barred on the underparts, with an orange crown and neck. **Eurasian Hobbies** (34cm) are somewhat similar to Peregrine Falcons (p 93) but smaller. Adults are streaked below with red 'trousers'. Immature birds are dark brown above. **Amur Falcons** (31cm) are blue-grey with red vent in the male and dark striped in the female. Both sexes are identified by their red bill and feet. The **Collared Falconet** (18cm) is a tiny, distinctive raptor.

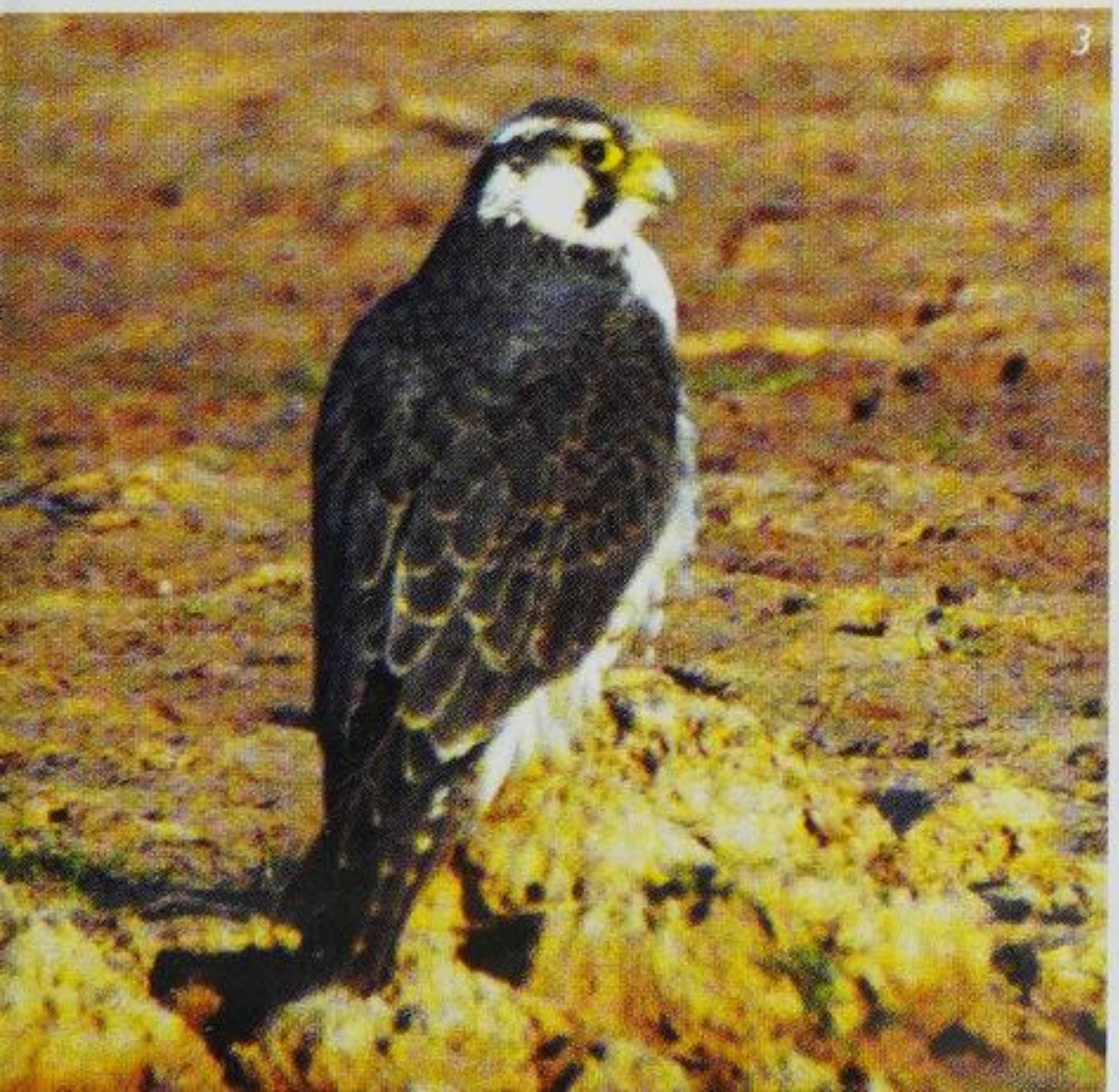


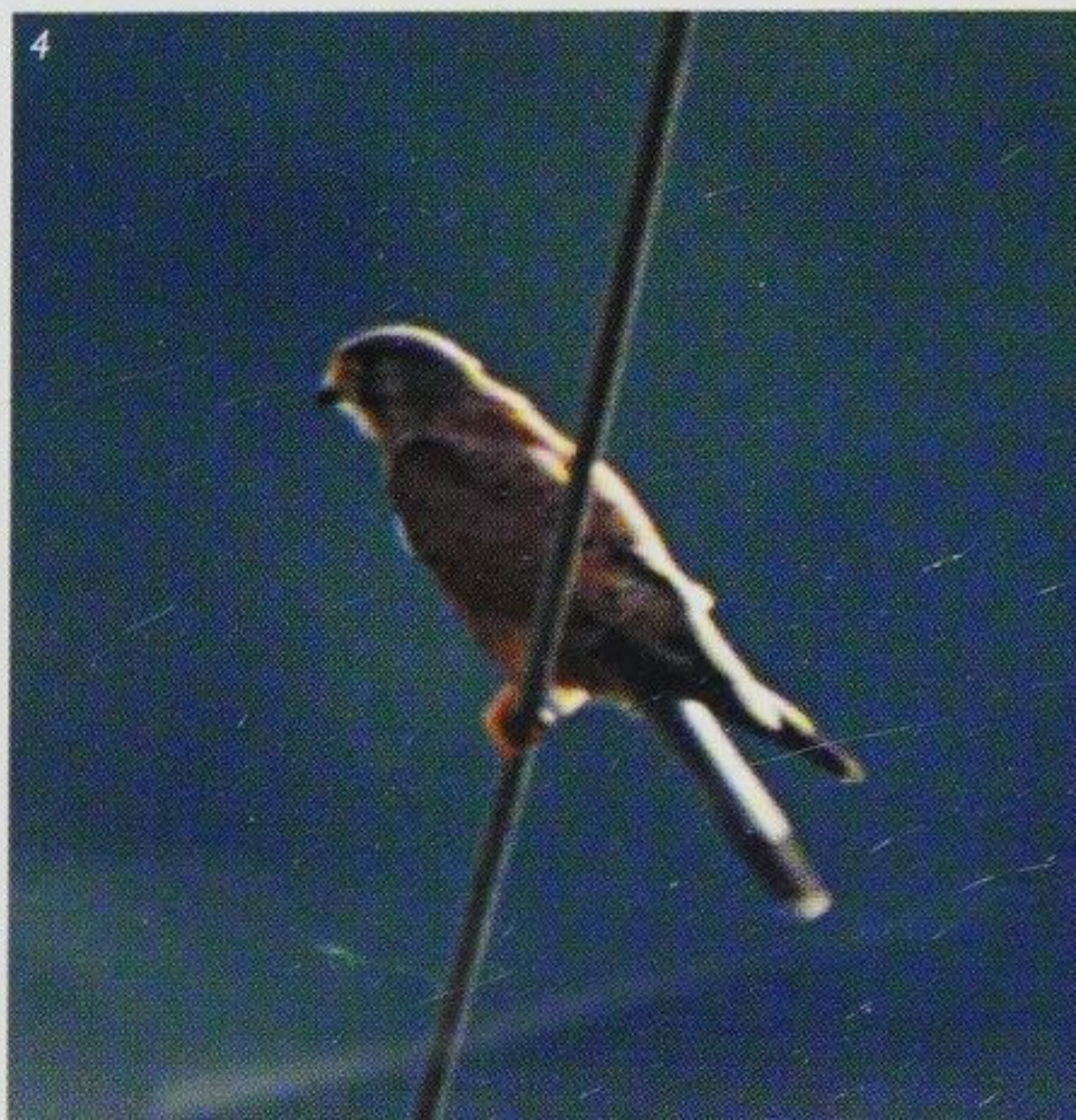
2 Red-necked Falcons are uncommon but widely distributed in open cultivation and woodland.
3 Amur Falcons - here a female - are uncommon passage migrants in wooded country.
4 The Collared Falconet can be expected in Himalayan forests such as in Corbett NP, Nepal and Sikkim.
5 Eurasian Hobbies breed in the Himalaya and are seen on migration in NW India.



The wintering race of the Peregrine Falcon can be found all over the subcontinent.

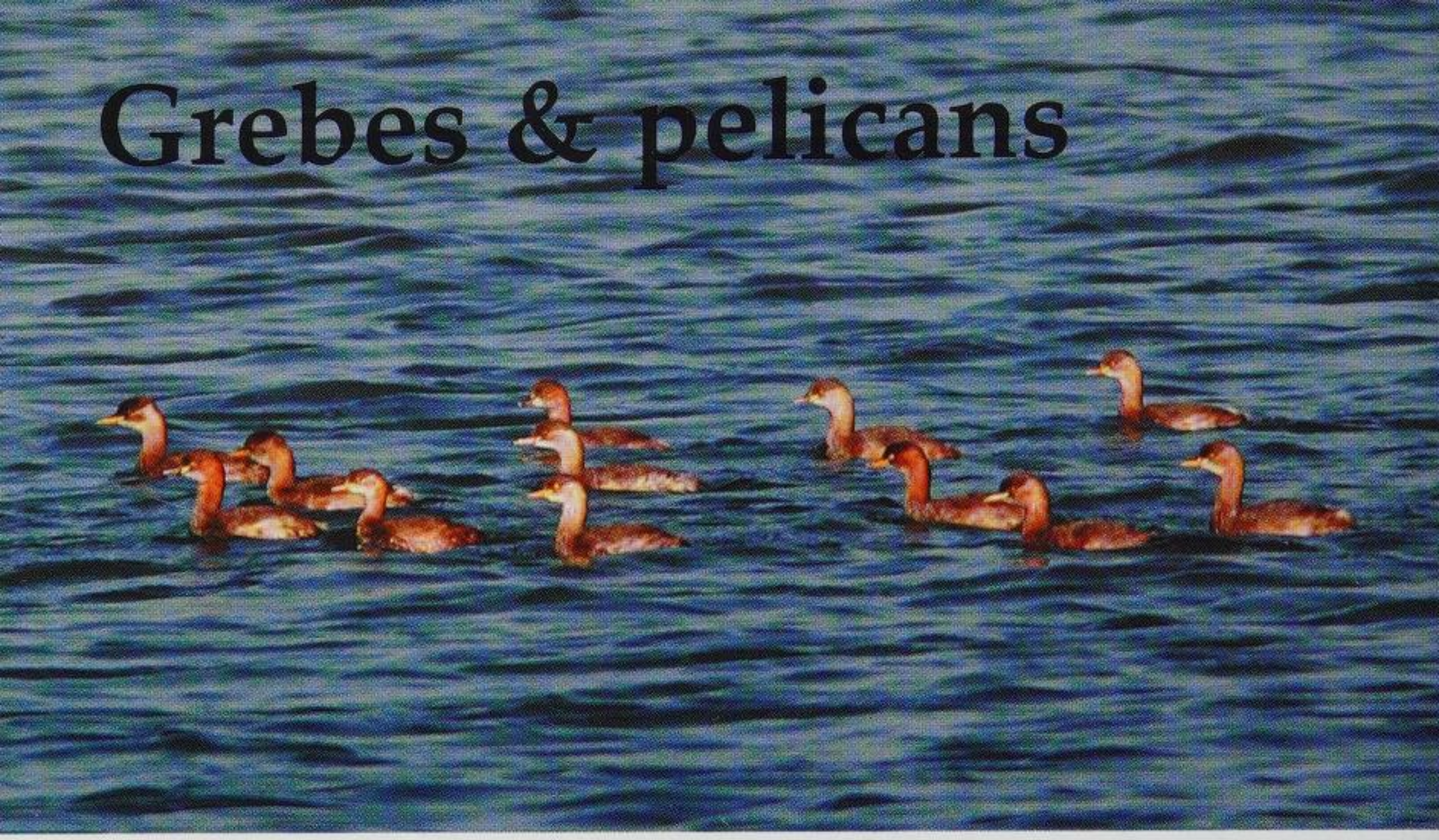
The **Peregrine Falcon** (40-48cm) winters in open hilly country and wetlands, which it surveys in its powerful, fast flight. In spectacular fashion it will swoop down through the sky to take birds on the wing. The race that winters in India is grey above, with a bold moustachial stripe. The underparts are white and barred with black. The rare dark resident race is rich orange below. One race has a reddish crown and could be confused for a Red-necked Falcon (see p 92) but the crown also shows some light and dark and the underparts are not barred. Juvenile birds are brown with streaking on the light underparts. The **Saker Falcon** (56cm) is a large, brown falcon, the feathers of the back often with orange-brown fringes. The **Laggar Falcon** (43-46cm, no photo) is similar but darker brown and differs further in its barred tail and dark thighs. A rare resident in much of India.





2 The breeding race of Peregrine Falcon is also widely distributed but rare.
3 Saker Falcons winter in deserts and around wetlands in the NW.
4 Common Kestrel (see p 92).

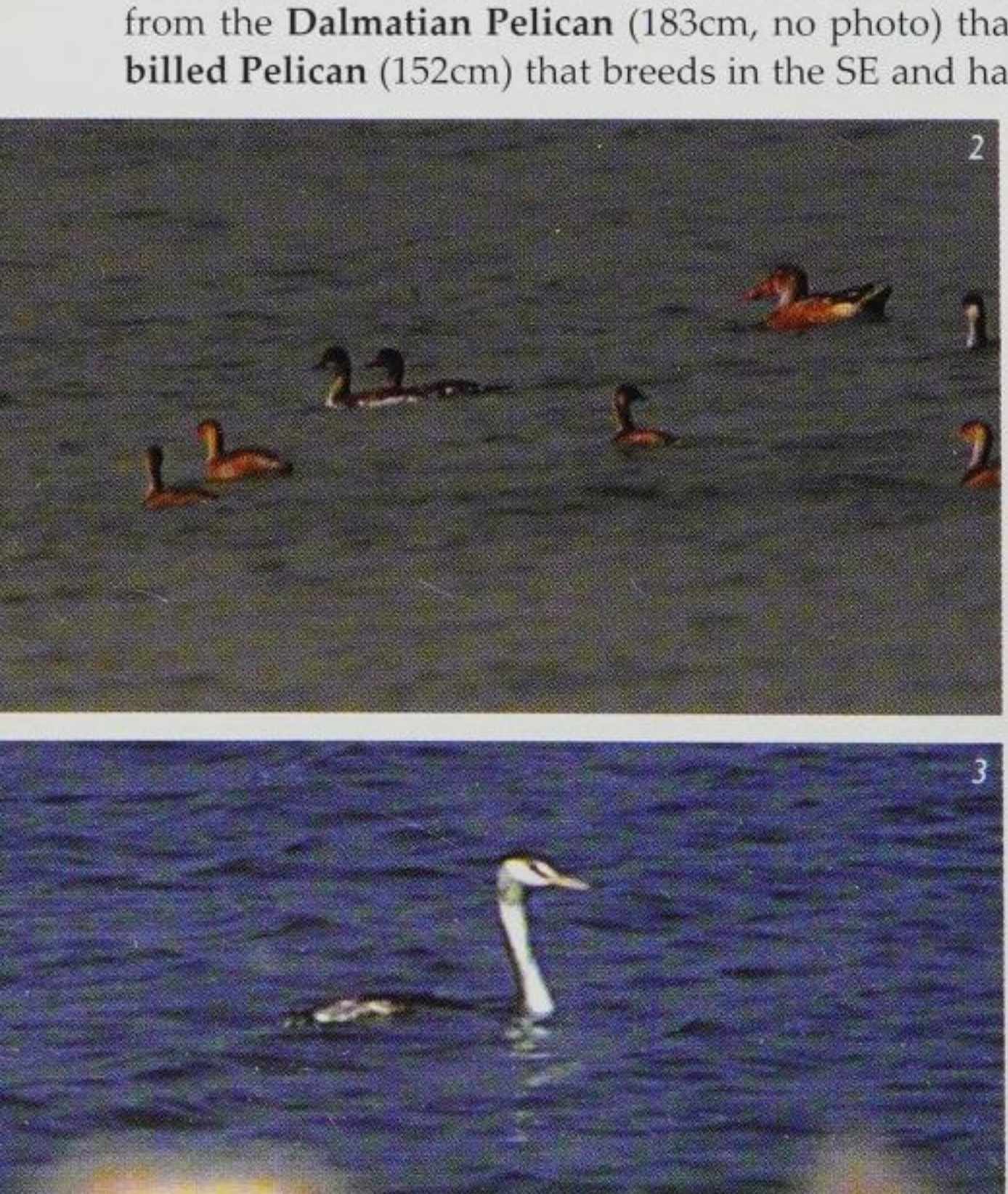
Grebes & pelicans



Little Grebes are common residents and winter visitors to marshes, lakes and village ponds throughout the subcontinent.

Long-necked water birds with long bodies, grebes sit and swim with the greater part of their bodies submerged. They dive for fish, insects and plant material. Pelicans are huge, easily identifiable birds that feed on fish.

The **Little Grebe** (23cm) is a small and stubby grebe, a familiar little resident and winter visitor. Its plumage is brown with lighter flanks and neck, the latter of which turns bright chestnut-brown in summer. The larger, uncommon **Black-necked Grebe** (33cm) has a whiter face and flanks (rufous in breeding season) and characteristic upturned bill and steep forehead. The much larger **Great Crested Grebe** (50cm) is dark grey with light flanks. The fore-neck and face are white, contrasting with dark cap and hind-neck. It grows large orange ear tufts in the breeding season. The **Great White Pelican** (175cm, no photo) has black flight feathers distinguishing it from the **Dalmatian Pelican** (183cm, no photo) that has fully white underwings and the **Spot-billed Pelican** (152cm) that breeds in the SE and has brown flight feathers.



2 Black-necked Grebes (two in the centre of the picture) mainly visit the NW.
3 Great Crested Grebes visit N and C India in winter.
4 Spot-billed Pelicans are resident in parts of the S, E and NE.

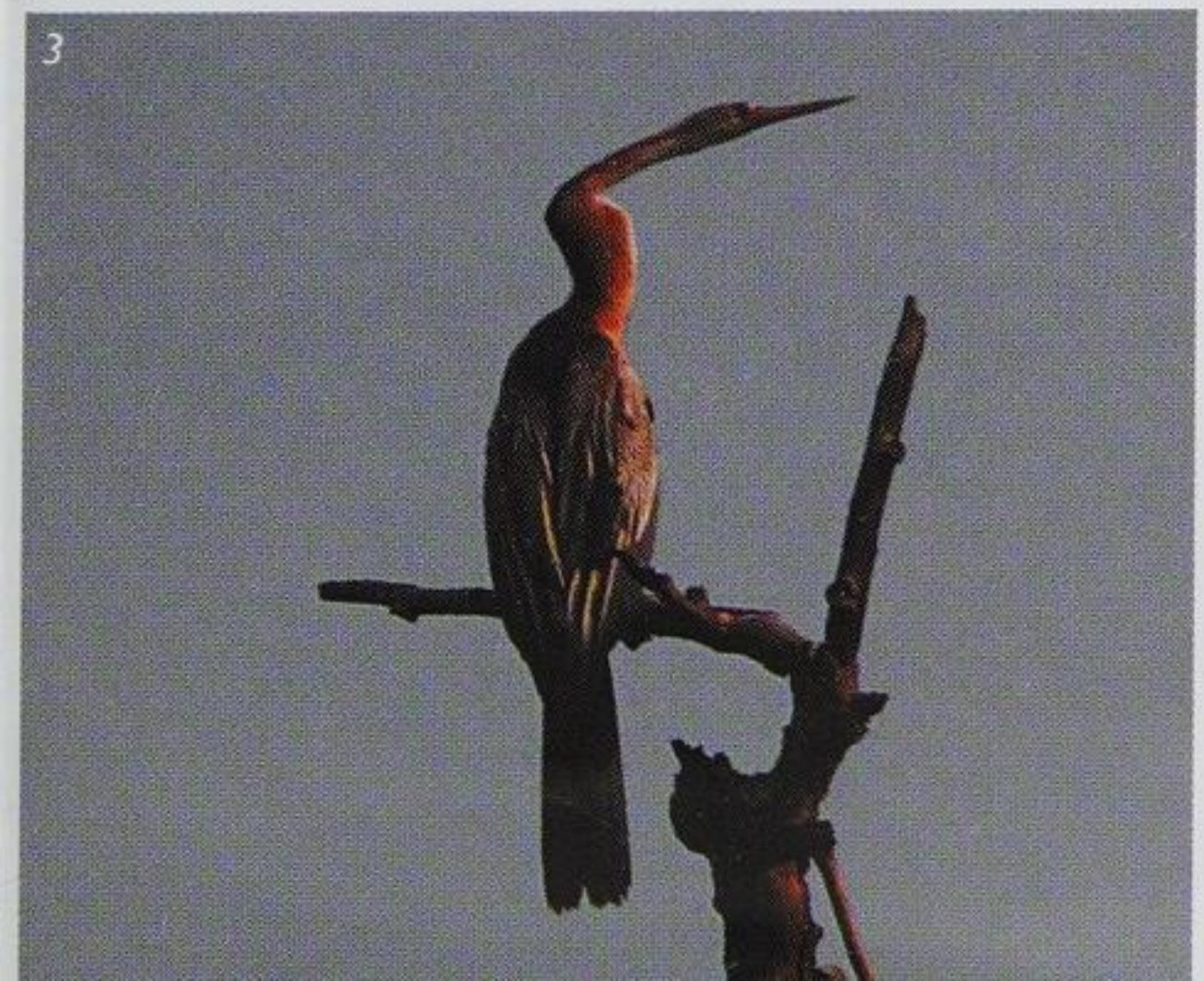
Indian Cormorants are residents over much of India.

Cormorants

Large wetland birds that share heronries with storks, egrets and pelicans. They catch fish by diving into the water. Work finished, they characteristically perch with their wings spread akimbo to dry them.

The **Indian Cormorant** (63cm) is a common marsh bird with a long, slender bill, white ear plumes while breeding and a yellow pouch below the bill. Like all cormorants, the **Little Cormorant** (51cm) is black. It is relatively small with shorter neck and bill. The neck is often warm-brown and the forehead is steep. Like the other species on this page, juveniles are brown, with white throat. The **Darter** (90cm) has a long, snake-like neck, sharp dagger-like bill and long tail. It also has fine white lines adorning the back and upperwings. The **Great Cormorant** (80cm) is very large with big, yellow pouch and white neck- and thigh-patches in the breeding season. Juveniles have white underparts.

2 Little Cormorants are equally widespread and common.
3 Darters visit swamps, ponds, lakes and rivers in most parts of India.
4 Great Cormorants also reside throughout the area with additional wintering populations. A Darter is seen in the background.



Cattle Egrets (winter plumage) feed near water, in fields and on pastures.

Egrets & herons

Various species of exotically-plumaged egrets are abundant in the subcontinent with their long necks, dagger-like bills and elongated legs. Breeding in colonies alongside other large water birds they feed for fish, amphibians and insects in a wide variety of wetlands, fields and water bodies.

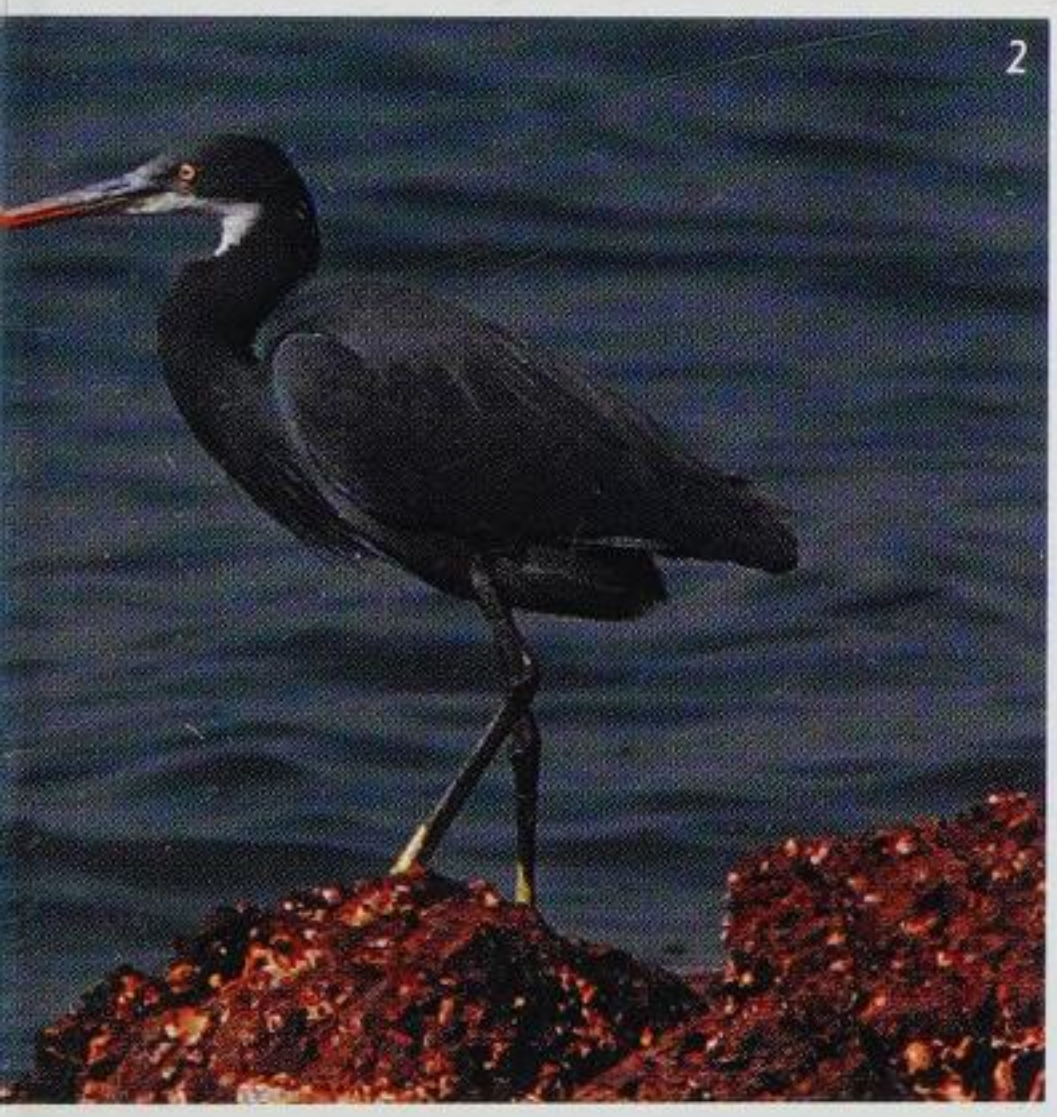
The **Cattle Egret** (51cm) is a common white egret that is found breeding in village trees. The large grazing animals it accompanies create an opportunistic feeding situation through the parasites they host and the insects they disturb. Cattle Egrets are identified by the combination of yellow bill and feet (duller in winter), relatively small size and short neck. The head, neck and back turn orange-yellow in summer. The similarly sized **Little Egret** (63cm) has the characteristic combination of a black bill and yellow-footed, black legs. A size larger, the **Intermediate Egret** (80cm) combines a yellow bill (black while breeding) with black legs. It can resemble the Cattle Egret, but note the longer neck.

2 Little Egrets are similarly distributed but less frequently venture away from water.

3 Cattle Egrets (summer plumage) are found throughout the subcontinent in fields and around wetlands.

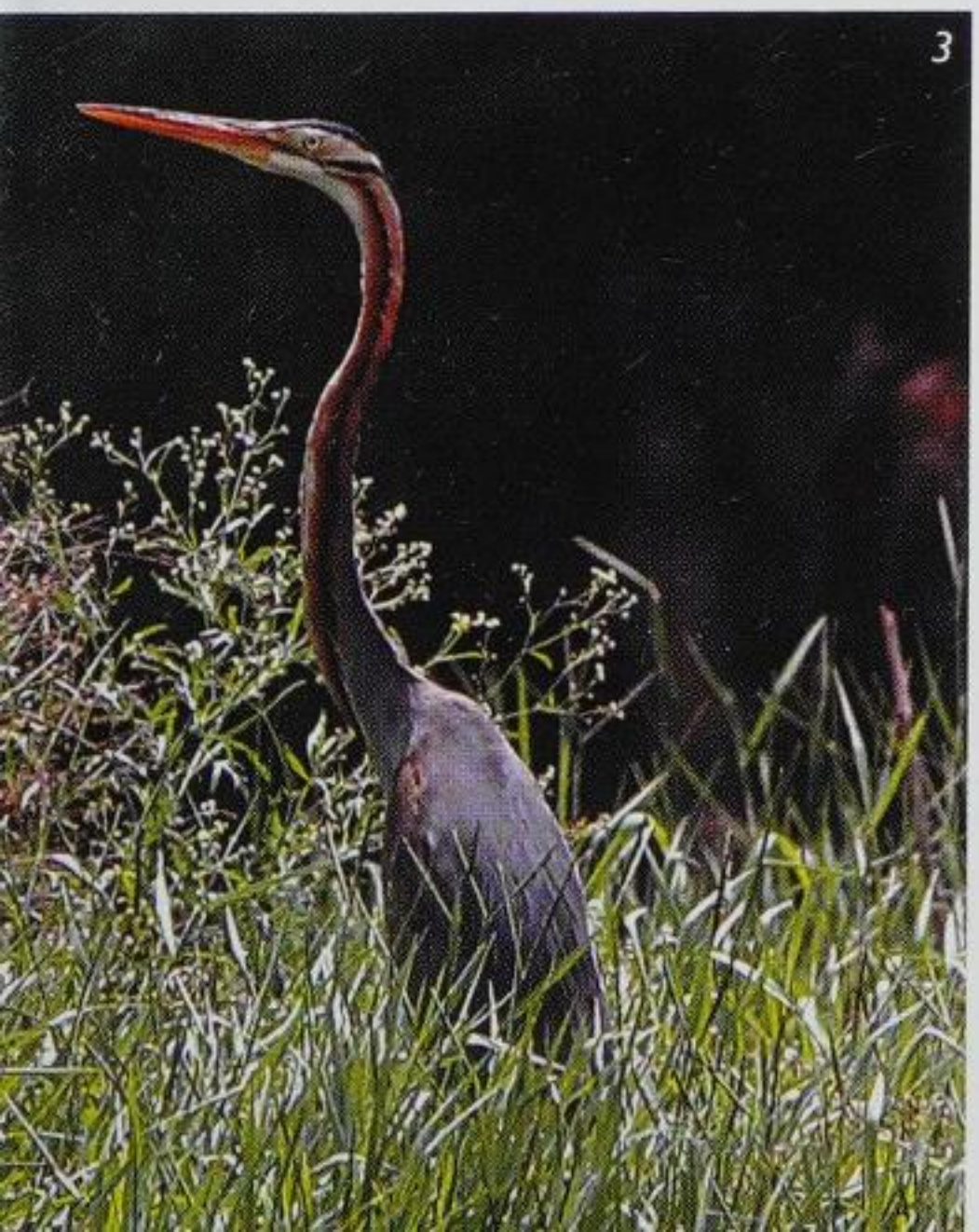
4 Intermediate Egrets occur at various types of wetlands.

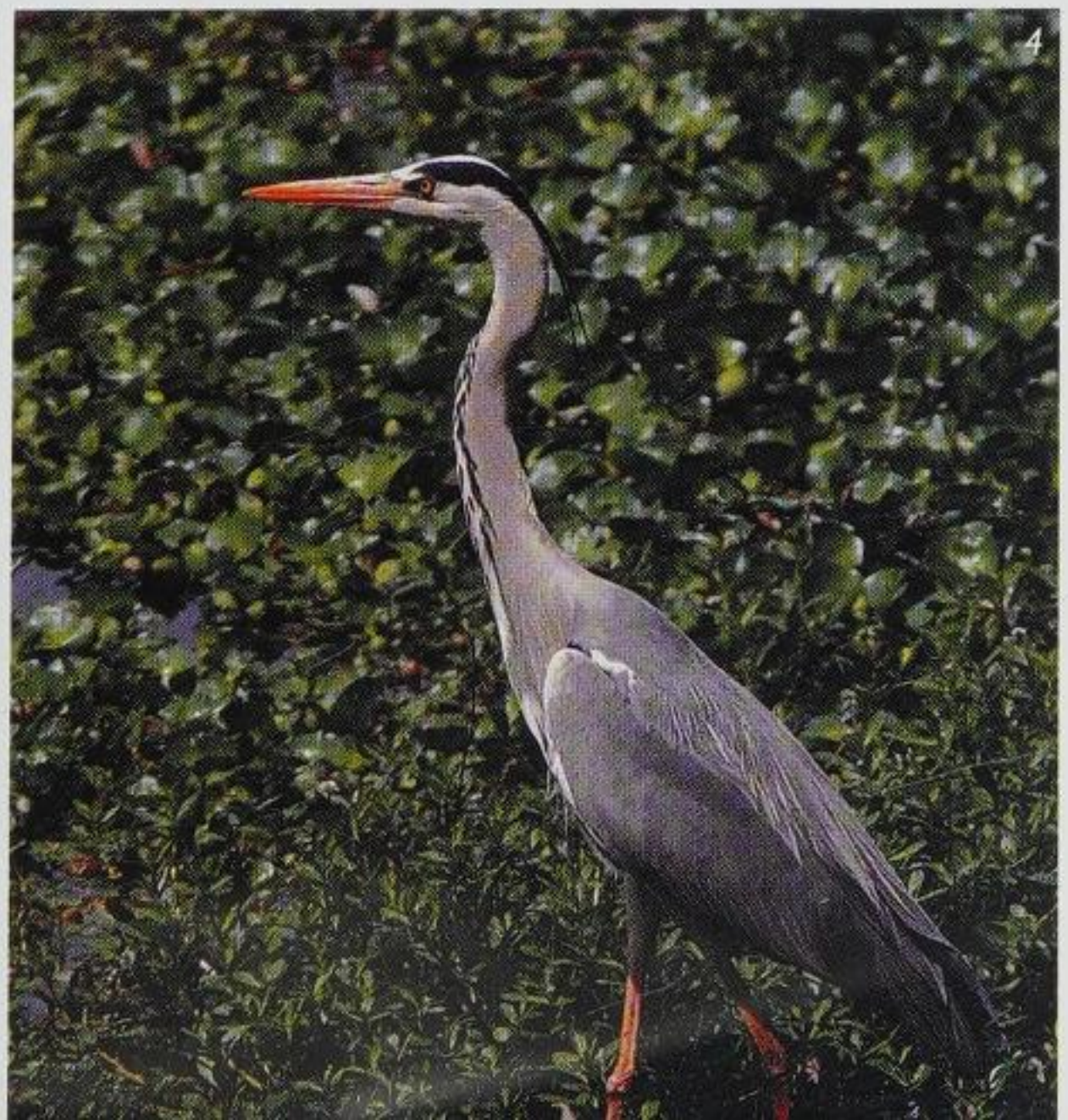
Great Egrets are seen at wetlands throughout the subcontinent.

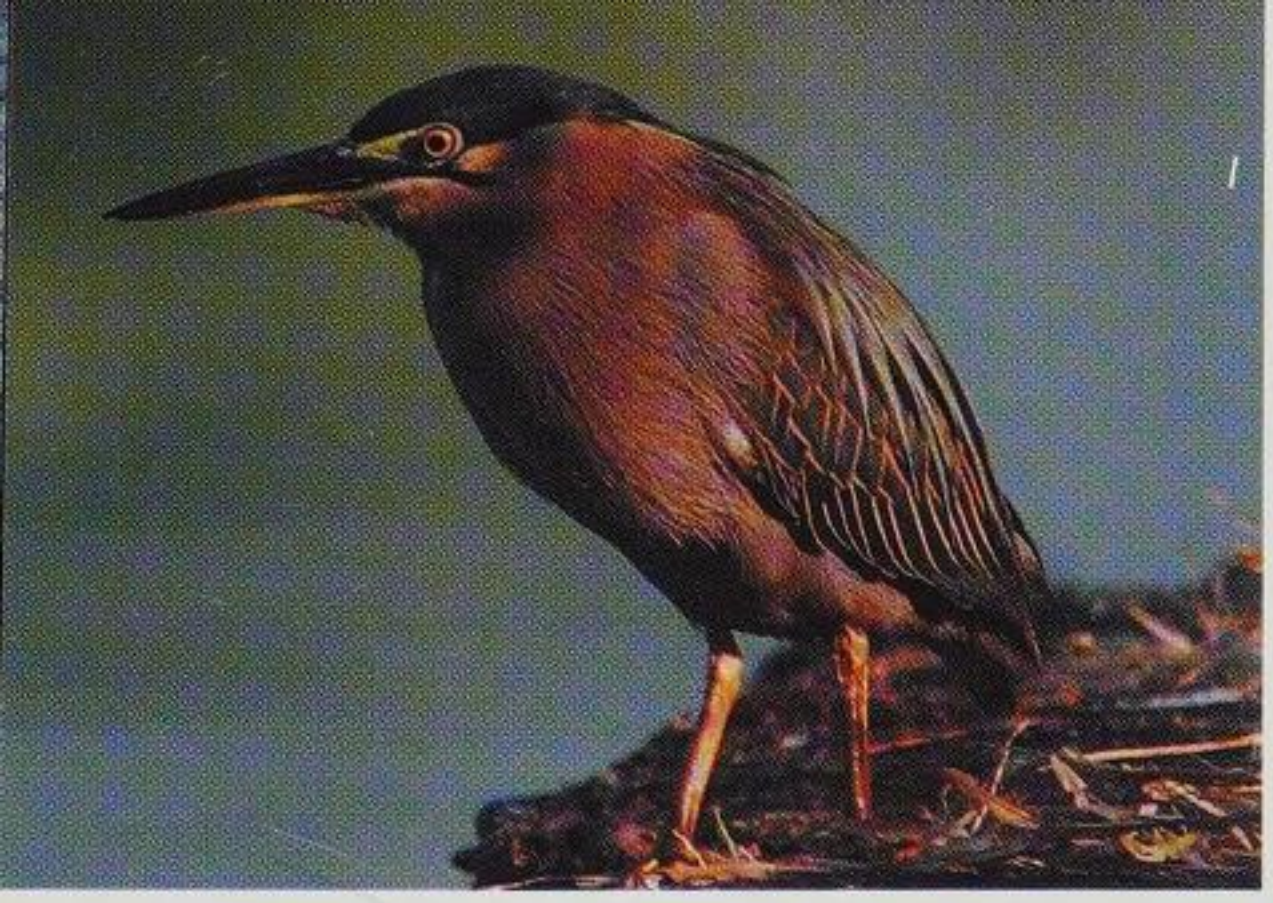


The **Great Egret** (96cm) is almost identical to the Intermediate, but the neck is considerably longer in proportion to the body. The **Western Reef Egret** (63cm) is normally seen in a grey phase with a light throat. The white phase looks much like a Little Egret but the bill and legs are yellow or light in colour. The unmistakable **Purple Heron** (97cm) is the largest and one of most handsome herons of the subcontinent. The stockier **Grey Heron** (98cm) can't be mistaken for anything else.

2 Western Reef Egrets are common along the W and S coast.
3 Purple Herons live in marshes and reedbeds.
4 Grey Herons are found on lakes, rivers and ponds and breed in parts of W, E and N India.

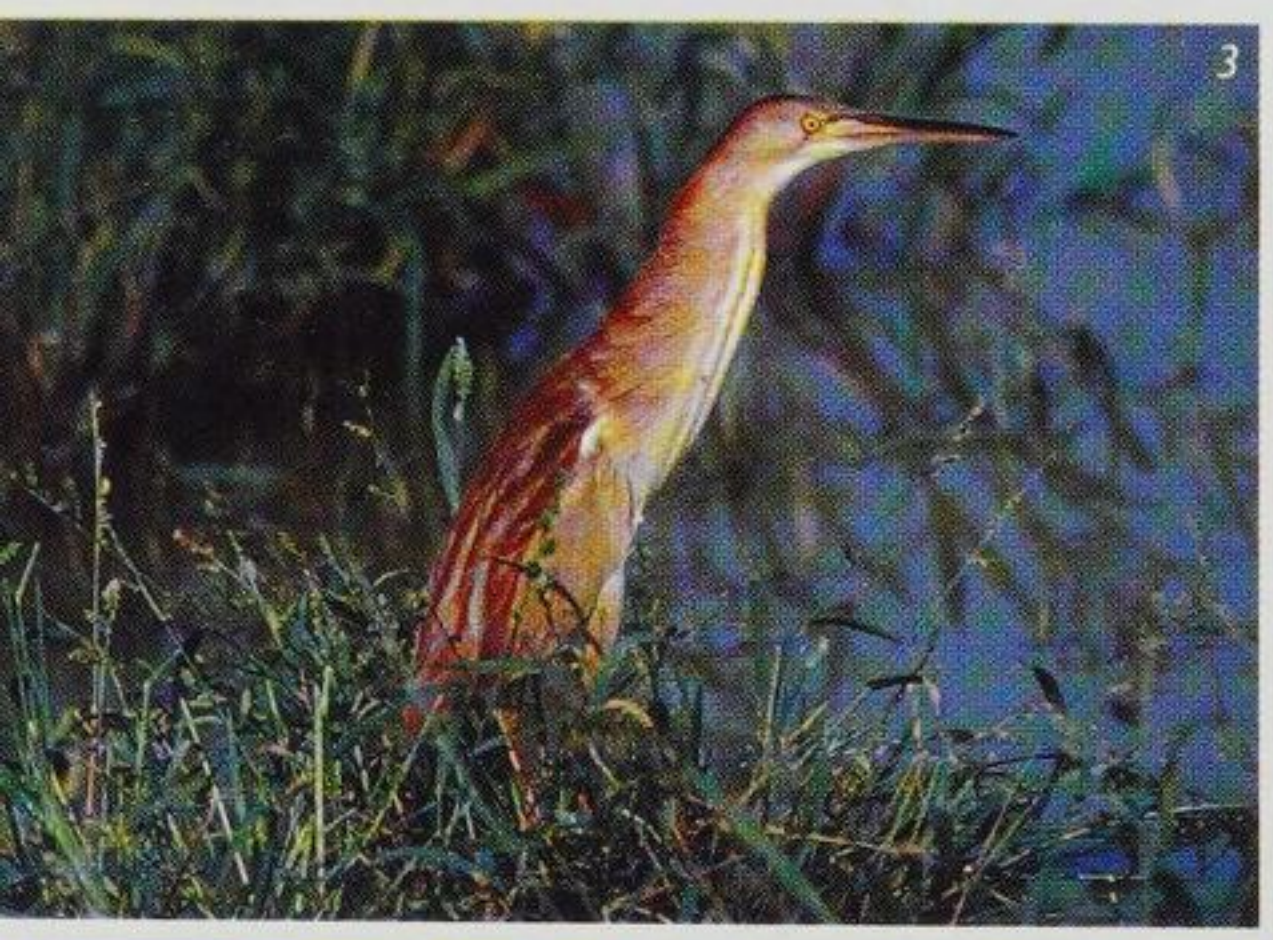






The **Little Heron** (46cm) is a small, dumpy, blue-grey heron with black cap and moustachial stripe. The **Indian Pond Heron** (46cm) is a small, brown heron with a short neck. Short-legged, its wings and belly are fully white. In summer the neck and upperparts turn yellow and maroon respectively. The **Black-crowned Night Heron** (51cm) is similarly squat but larger. It is bluish-grey with a black crown, mantle and bill. Juveniles are brown with dark streaks and light spots. The **Yellow Bittern** (36cm) is smaller and like other bitterns very secretive. It is yellow with dark flight feathers and crown. The **Black Bittern** (58cm) is black with a broad yellow flash along the streaked neck. The female is brown The **Cinnamon Bittern** (38cm) is entirely chestnut-brown.

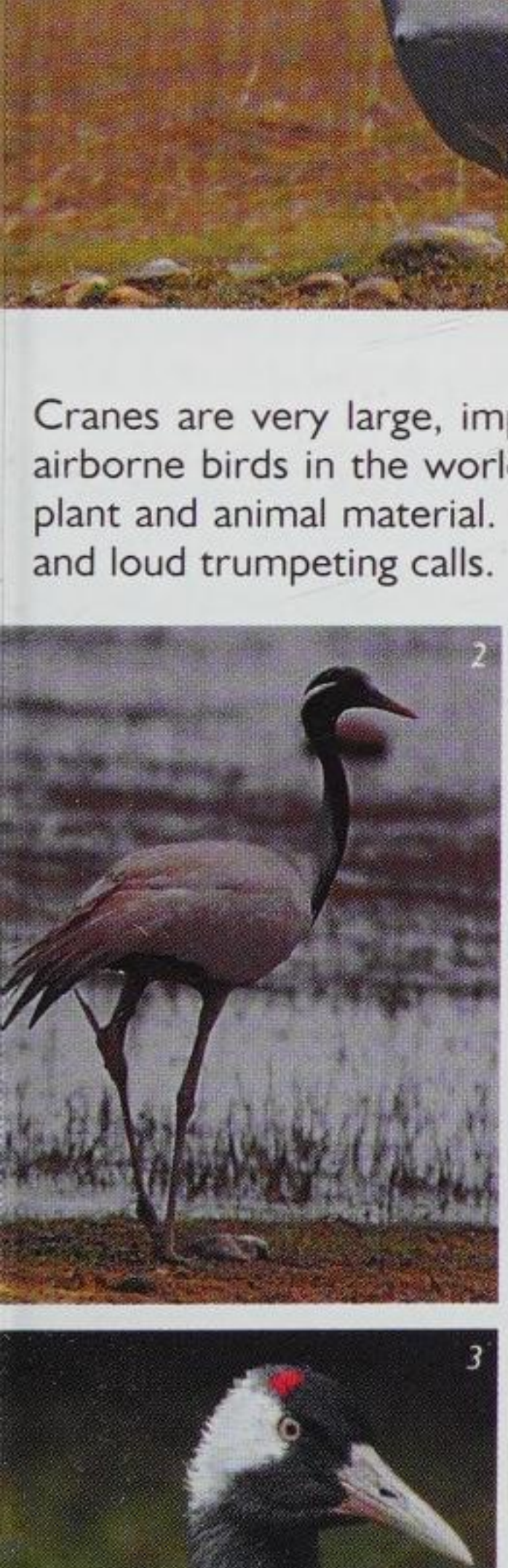
1 Little Herons are found in vegetation near streams or ponds and in mangroves throughout India but not in parts of the NW.
2 Indian Pond Herons inhabit marshes, ponds and paddyfields throughout the subcontinent.
3 Yellow Bitterns breed in reedbeds and thick swamps and are patchily distributed - mainly as residents - in the NW.
4 Black-crowned Night Herons are widely distributed.
5 Indian Pond Heron (non-breeding).
6 Black-crowned Night Heron (juvenile).
7 Cinnamon Bitterns frequent reedbeds and swamps in N India.
8 Black Bitterns have an erratic distribution throughout much of the subcontinent.



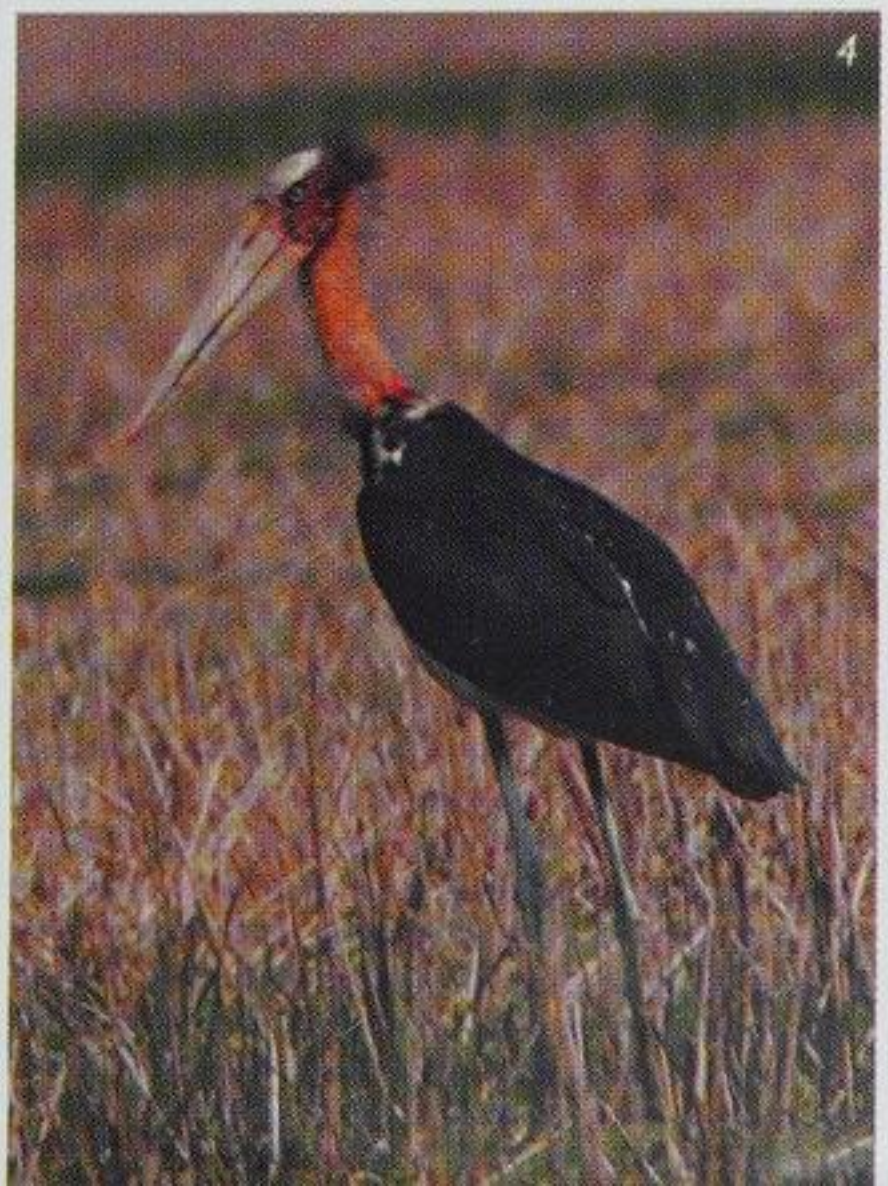
Cranes & adjutants

Sarus Cranes breed in marshes and feed on fields and pastures in N and C India.

Cranes are very large, imposing birds of fields and marshes. They are amongst the biggest airborne birds in the world and fly with their necks outstretched. They feed on a variety of plant and animal material. Cranes are celebrated for their elaborate courtship dance displays and loud trumpeting calls.



The **Sarus Crane** (156cm) makes for an impressive appearance as it stalks around farm fields, standing almost as tall as a man. Though unmistakable, it is sometimes misidentified as the very rare **Siberian Crane** (140cm, no photo), which is smaller and pure white with red restricted to the face. The **Demoiselle Crane** (95cm) is a blue-grey bird with black head and neck markings that spill over into extended breast feathers. A white line behind the eye broadens into a plume along the neck. Like other wintering cranes it visits crops and cultivation and the banks of rivers and reservoirs. The **Common Crane** (114cm) has a black neck and crown separated by a broad white band that starts behind the eye and extends down the neck. The bill is light and the crown has a red patch. It should not be mistaken for the rare **Black-necked Crane** (139cm, no photo) that lacks the white band on the black neck and has black tail feathers.



The **Lesser Adjutant** (110cm) is a large black-and-white, unmistakable stork. The rarer, **Greater Adjutant** (130cm, no photo) is only common in Assam. Its large gular pouch and a grey panel on the upper wings distinguish it from the Lesser Adjutant.

2 Demoiselle Cranes winter in N, W and C India.
3 Common Cranes winter in the same regions.
4 Lesser Adjutants are resident in the NE and are uncommon and very local elsewhere.

Storks

Painted Storks feed in jheels and swamps and reside throughout India apart from arid areas in the NW and NE.

Larger than egrets, storks characteristically stretch their necks in flight - egrets contract them. Heavy bills help harvest a variety of foodstuff such as insects, fish, amphibians and small mammals. Ibises are smaller with thinner, down-curved bills.

The **Painted Stork** (95cm) is a large, red-headed stork with a long, yellow, slightly down-curved bill. Its shoulders and lower breast show black barring while the folded wings reveal pink tertials on the back. The impressive **Black-necked Stork** (140cm) is India's largest stork. It is black-and-white with a black head and neck and a massive, slightly upturned bill. The **Woolly-necked Stork** (85cm) has a black head and body with red legs and a white neck covered in soft down. The **Black Stork** (106cm, no photo) is all black with white under-belly and red bill. It winters in small numbers in N India. The **Asian Openbill** (81cm) has an off-white plumage that contrasts with black flight feathers. The dull-coloured bill is uniquely shaped.

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2 Asian Openbills nest in large colonies in marshes in most of non-desert India.
3 Woolly-necked Storks occur in wetlands and wooded areas through most of India apart from NW deserts and regions of the E.
4 Black-necked Storks are now only seen in small numbers in N and NW India.

4

Ibises & flamingos

Black-headed Ibises are common in wet fields, marshes, jheels and rivers in most of India apart from regions in the E.

The **Black-headed Ibis** (75cm) is white with black head and neck and long, down-curved bill typical of ibises. The **Glossy Ibis** (52cm) is entirely dark with a purple-green gloss to its plumage. The **Black Ibis** (68cm) is overall dark like the Glossy but lacks any shine and is larger with diagnostic white shoulder-patches. Look also for the red crown in adults. The **Greater Flamingo** (140cm) is a well-known pinkish bird with a very thick, kinked bill that filters tiny food particles out of water while feeding. The smaller **Lesser Flamingo** (100cm, no photo) has a darker pink bill with less black on the tip. The white **Eurasian Spoonbill** (60cm) has a shaggy crest with yellow on the lower neck. The broad-tipped bill is raked from side to side in a semicircle while feeding.

2 Glossy Ibises frequent marshes and ponds in parts of the NW and much of the SW.
3 Black Ibises feed around lakes, in fields and on rubbish tips in most of India.
4 Greater Flamingos occur on mudflats in Gujarat and wetlands in the W, NW and S.
5 Eurasian Spoonbills feed along the muddy edges of marshes and are resident in the W half of India.

Crows

House Crows are found in urban and agricultural areas throughout the subcontinent.

A family of intelligent birds that feed on carrion and waste but can also be vicious raiders of other birds' nests. Bold in nature, some species are largely black while other branches of the family display very colourful forms.

The **House Crow** (43cm) is well-known throughout India. **Large-billed Crows** (50cm) are less abundant in the lowlands but are the commonest crow in the Himalaya where they are often mistaken for ravens. Note the steep forehead and the more neatly-feathered underparts. In the high Himalaya **Red-billed Choughs** (36-40cm) and **Yellow-billed Choughs** (38cm) are found, but not necessarily alongside each other. Both are smallish crows with high-pitched calls, red legs, and distinctive bill colours. In Ladakh the **Carrion Crow** (47cm, no photo) is a common black-billed crow with a flatter head and smaller bill compared to the Large-billed.

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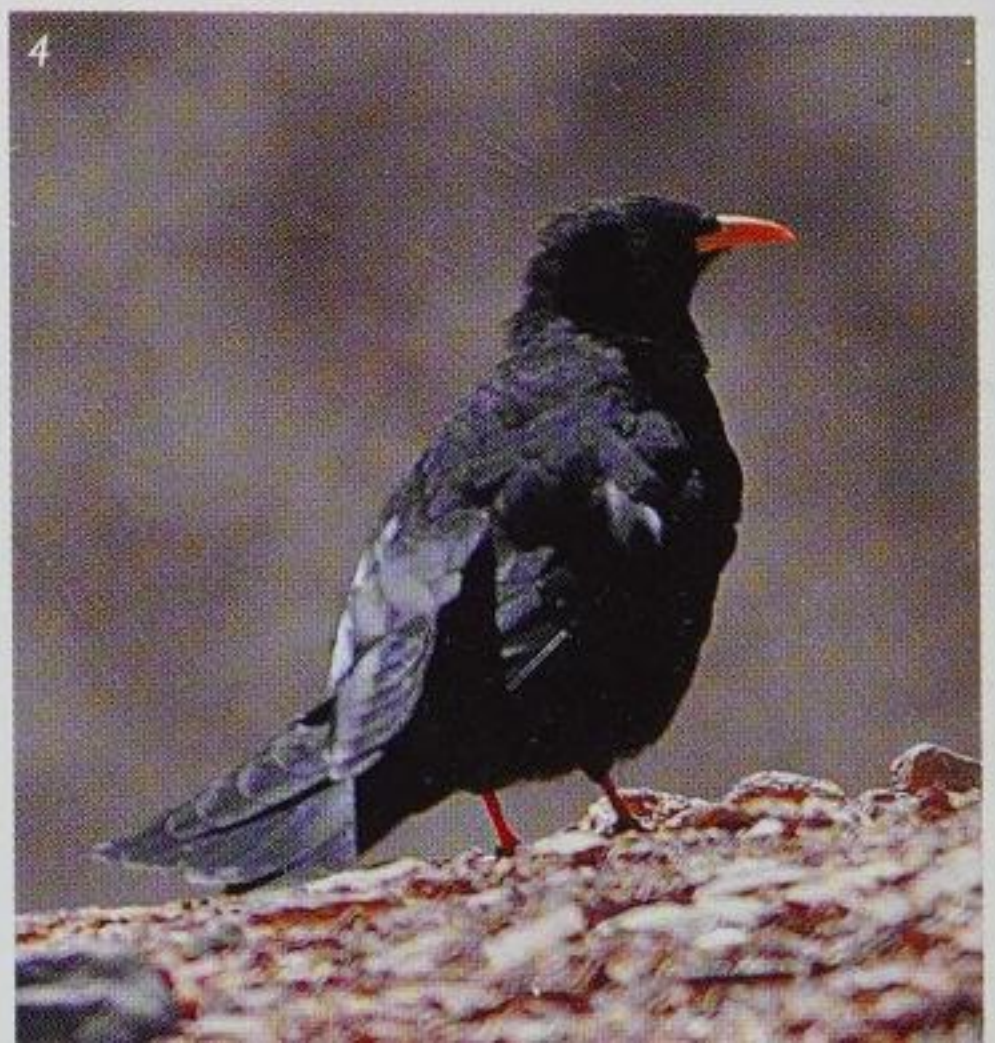
2 Large-billed Crows prefer better-wooded areas but are also common above the treeline in the Himalaya.
3 Red-billed Choughs frequent alpine meadows and mountain villages in the high Himalaya.
4 Yellow-billed Choughs inhabit similar areas in Trans-Himalayan habitats.



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Magpies & raven

Red-billed Blue Magpies inhabit mixed forests in the Himalayan foothills.

The **Red-billed Blue Magpie** (70cm) is a breathtaking bird. It is entirely blue on the upperparts though when seen from below - or when it disappears into the trees - this colour is sometimes missed. Often the graduated black-and-white tail is first noticed. The similar **Yellow-billed Blue Magpie** (66cm) differs mainly in bill colour but also has less white on the nape. The **Black-billed Magpie** (52cm) has a very characteristic black-and-white plumage with a green-and-blue cast to tail and wings. The **Common Raven** (69cm) looks shabbier than a crow with longer neck-shackles. It calls in much deeper, resonant and sometimes melodious tones. In flight, the raven also has a different profile with long, angled and pointed wings. The tail is also distinctly wedge-shaped, but note that Large-billed Crows can appear to have similarly-shaped tails.

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2 Yellow-billed Blue Magpies are found in similar habitats, but higher, up to the treeline.
3 Black-billed Magpies are found in Trans-Himalayan habitat in Ladakh.
4 Common Ravens inhabit the Himalaya and deserts of the NW.

Black-headed Jays are found in forests and open woodland in the Himalaya from 1000 to 2500m.

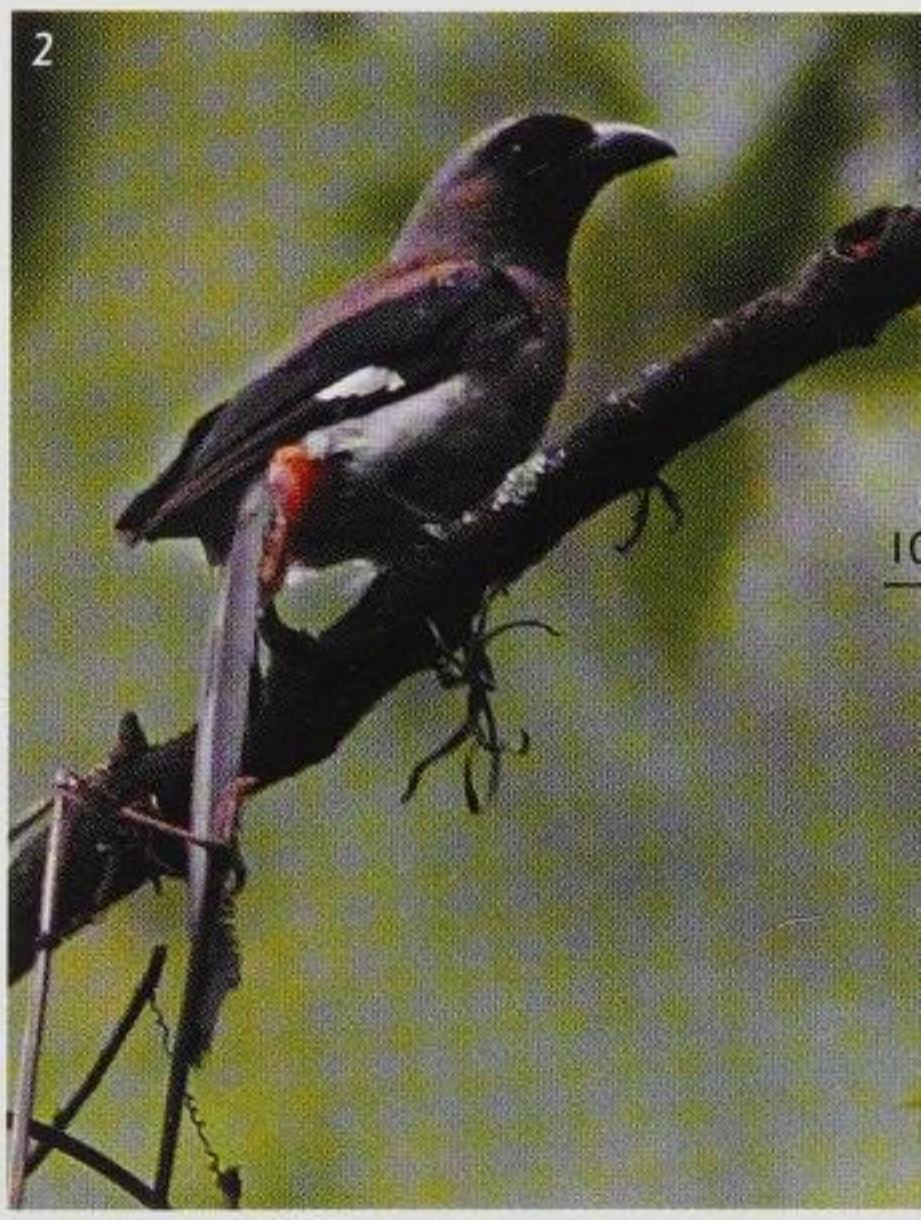
Jays & treepies

The **Eurasian Jay** (33cm) is a handsome bird, salmon with black on the upperparts, white rump and bluish wing-panels. The **Black-headed Jay** (33cm) is similar but more purple with blue barring on the tail. Note that white is absent from rump but present in the wings. The head is black with a slight crest. **Spotted Nutcrackers** (32cm) are distinctive birds of coniferous forests in the Himalaya. Note the brown body densely dotted with broad white streaks and the black-and-white wings. The **Common Green Magpie** (38cm) is unmistakable.

2 Eurasian Jays breed in Himalayan temperate forests from 2000 to over 3000m.
3 Spotted Nutcrackers prefer Himalayan coniferous forests up to the treeline.
4 Common Green Magpies are seen in tropical foothill forests of the C and E Himalaya.

Rufous Treepies inhabit all sorts of wooded country throughout the subcontinent.

The **Rufous Treepie** (50cm) is a widespread and very common treepie with a characteristic plumage. In the Himalaya look for the similar but overall greyer **Grey Treepie** (42cm). It doesn't show bright rufous on the back and rump like the Rufous Treepie. Look for the light crown and neck (compared to the Rufous' all-dark head) and the lack of white in the wings. The **White-bellied Treepie** (50cm) has fully white underparts, hind-crown and neck. The **Eurasian Jackdaw** (33cm) is a small, black crow with a grey neck and white iris.



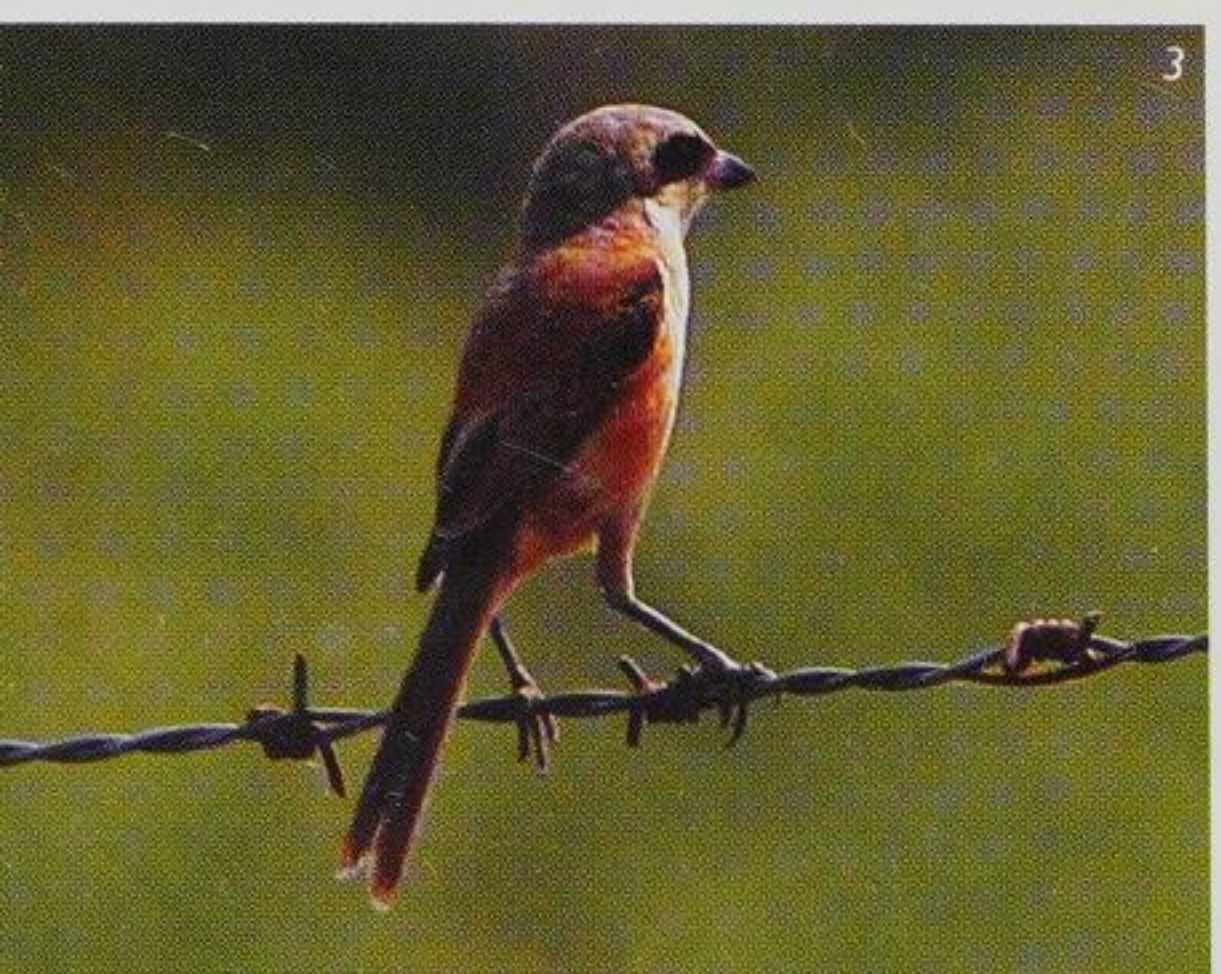
2 Grey Treepies prefer broad-leaved forest with good undergrowth up to 2000m in the Himalayan foothills.
3 White-bellied Treepies breed in the forests of the southern half of the W Ghats.
4 Eurasian Jackdaws have a restricted distribution in Kashmir and winter in N Pakistan.

Shrikes, cuckooshrikes, woodshrikes

Long-tailed Shrikes occur in open and well-wooded habitats throughout the subcontinent, only summering in the Himalaya.

Shrikes are seen perched upright atop bushes, telephone wires and exposed branches in open habitats where they feed on insects, small mammals and birds. They are well equipped for the job with heavy bills that are hooked at the tip. Woodshrikes are shorter-tailed and keep to wooded habitats.Cuckooshrikes are birds with long bills used to feed on insects. They inhabit open forest, scrub, gardens and groves. The Asian Fairy Bluebird is alone in its family.

The **Long-tailed Shrike** (25cm) is an assertive if not aggressive bird. Like other shrikes they impale larders of their catch on thorns. The amount of rufous on the lower back and flanks varies in different races; in the C and E Himalaya they have a black cap. The shorter-tailed **Grey-backed Shrike** (25cm, no photo) is darker grey without any rufous on the back. It breeds in Trans-Himalayan terrain but note that Long-tailed Shrikes are common in similar high mountain regions and often don't show any rufous on the back. The smaller **Bay-backed Shrike** (18cm) has a chestnut back and rump. The **Southern Grey Shrike** (25cm) is pristine white, black and grey.



2 Bay-backed Shrikes also occur in wooded habitats.
3 Juvenile Long-tailed Shrike.
4 Southern Grey Shrikes reside in arid areas in N, W and C India.

Rufous-tailed Shrikes visit the NW in small numbers in winter and on migration.

The **Rufous-tailed Shrike** (17cm) is a small shrike with a rufous tail and reddish-brown crown that contrasts considerably with the light grey-brown back. The **Brown Shrike** (19cm) is very similar, but it is more uniformly brown, with less divergence between the colour of the crown, back and tail than the Rufous-backed. The **Common Woodshrike** (16cm) is a dull-grey bird with a sweet voice. Calls include an ascending 'we-we-we-we' and 'weet'. Note the white base to the tail, white supercilium and dark around the eye. The **Large Woodshrike** (23cm) is larger with no white on supercilium and tail. The **Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike** (14cm) is light grey with dark upperparts and a black cap. Note the broad white wing-bars.

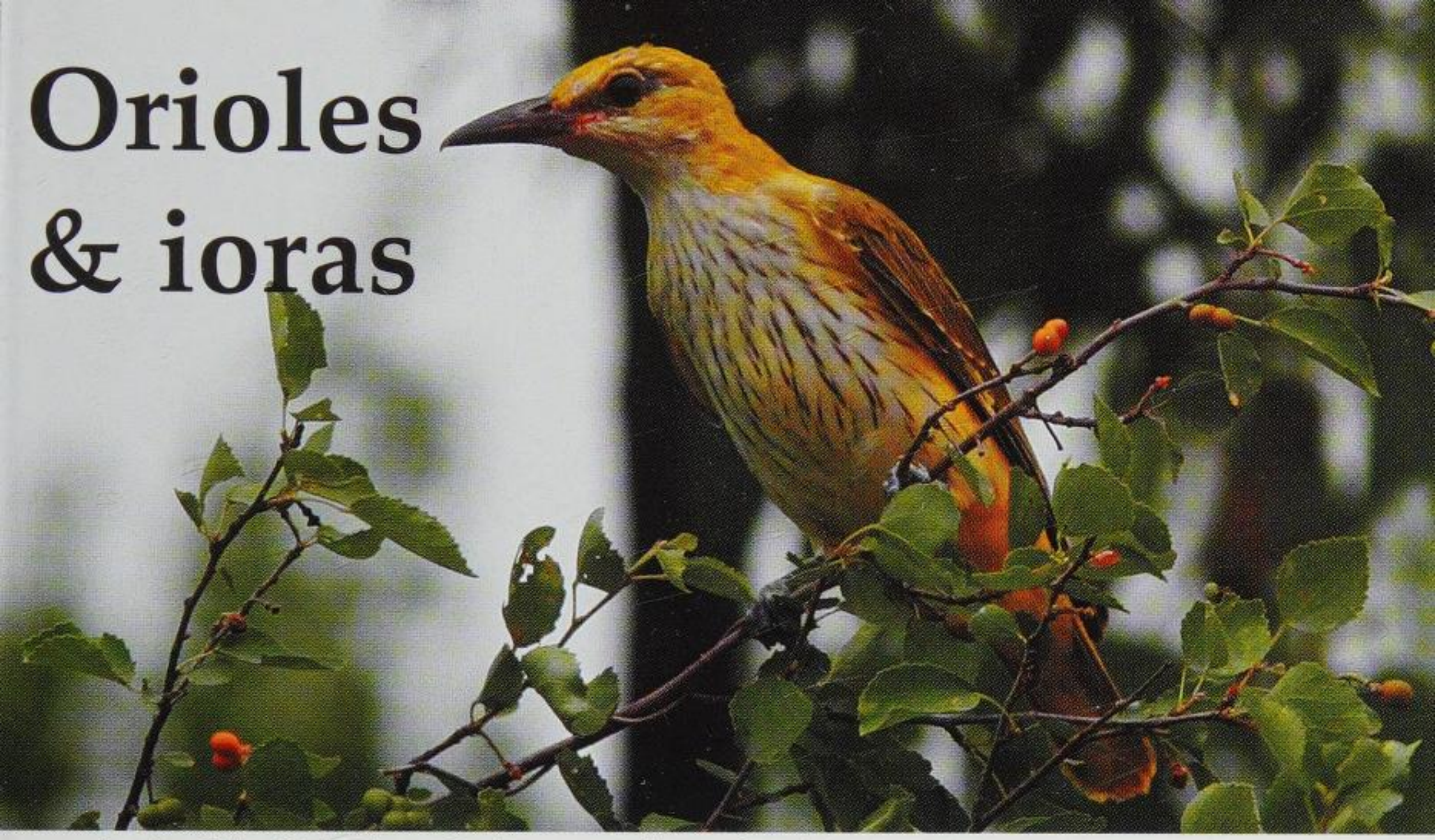
2 Bar-winged Flycatcher Shrikes inhabit the Himalaya, E and SW India.
3 Brown Shrikes winter over much of India except the NW.
4 Common Woodshrikes are all-India residents in a variety of wooded habitats.
5 Large Woodshrikes are found in forests in S, E and NE India.

Asian Fairy Bluebirds occur in evergreen forests in the NE and SW.

The **Asian Fairy Bluebird** (27cm) is a black, thrush-like bird with blue crown, back, rump and vent. Females are dull blue and seem uniformly grey-black in the shade of trees. Calls: a 'wiep-wiep' and a pleasant warble. The **Black-headed Cuckooshrike** (20cm) is grey above with a white belly and black head. Females are light grey with barred underparts. The **Black-winged Cuckooshrike** (20cm) is dark grey with black wings and large white dots on the underside of the tail, which distinguishes it from the fairly similar Grey-bellied Cuckoo (p 51). The **Large Cuckooshrike** (28cm) is entirely light grey with black lores. The Himalayan race has a lightly barred belly but note that juvenile and female Black-headed and juvenile Black-winged are also barred. Call: a loud 'chijeeeuw'.

2 Black-headed Cuckooshrikes reside throughout India apart from the NW.
3 Black-winged Cuckooshrikes breed in the foothills of the Himalaya.
4 Large Cuckooshrikes are resident in most of India.

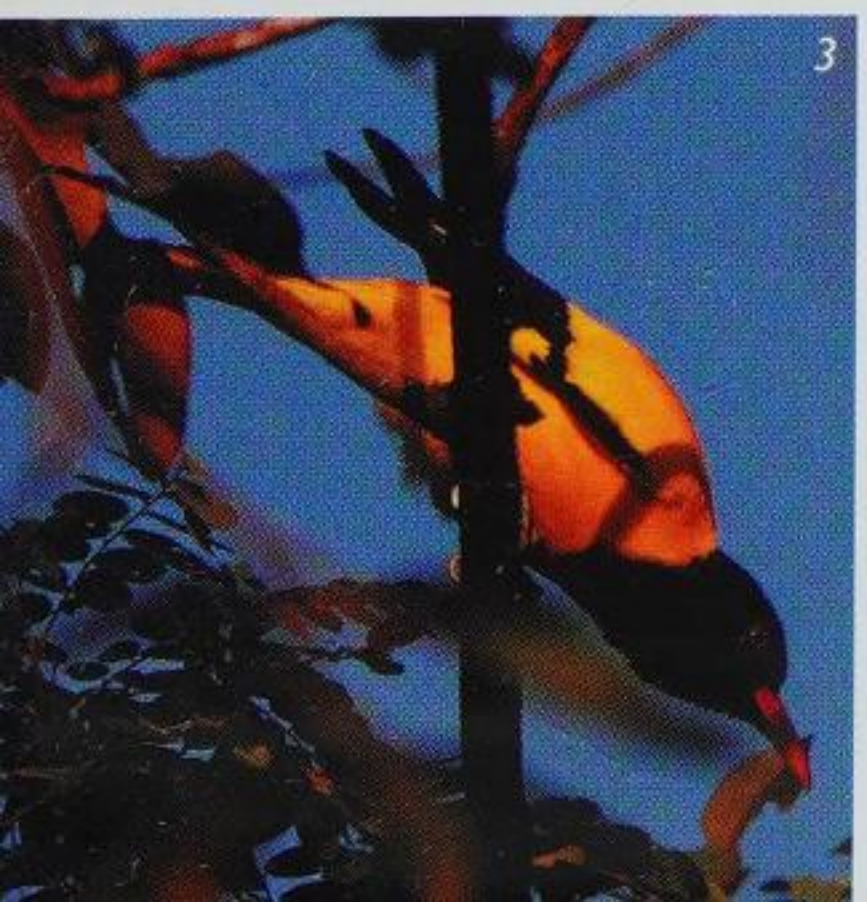
Orioles & ioras



Eurasian Golden Orioles - here a female - occur in all types of wooded areas in India, being summer visitors to the NW.

Orioles are golden-yellow birds of leafy trees that feed on fruits and insects. Ioras are sparrow-sized and live off a similar diet.

The **Eurasian Golden Oriole** (25cm) is a striking black-and-yellow bird, the female being green with streaking over the whitish underparts. Song: 'weelowaa'. The **Black-hooded Oriole** (25cm) is similar but with a black head in both sexes. While males have black-and-yellow upperparts, the females are uniformly greenish-yellow above. Calls a loud 'pooleee'. The red-brown **Maroon Oriole** (28cm) has black head and wings, conspicuous white eyes and a grey beak. Females are duller brown with streaked underparts. The **Common Iora** (14cm) is a small yellow bird with greenish back and black-and-white wings. A variety of clear calls include an ascending double note. The race of the far S and Sri Lanka has a black crown and back.

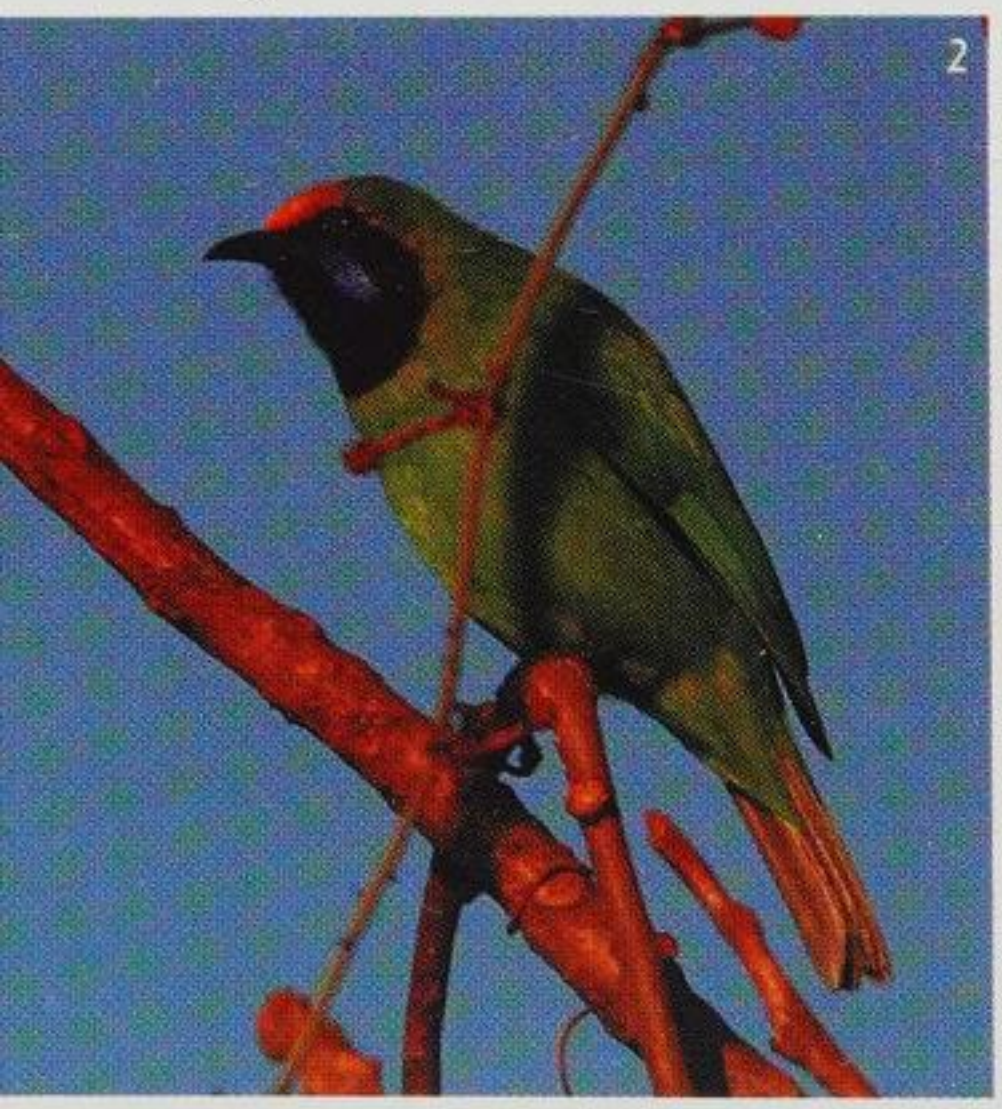


2 Maroon Orioles breed in forests up to 2400m in the Himalaya.
3 Black-hooded Orioles are resident in well-wooded habitat over most of India apart from the NW.
4 Common Ioras are found in woods, gardens etc. throughout India apart from dry regions in the NW.
5 Male Eurasian Golden Oriole.

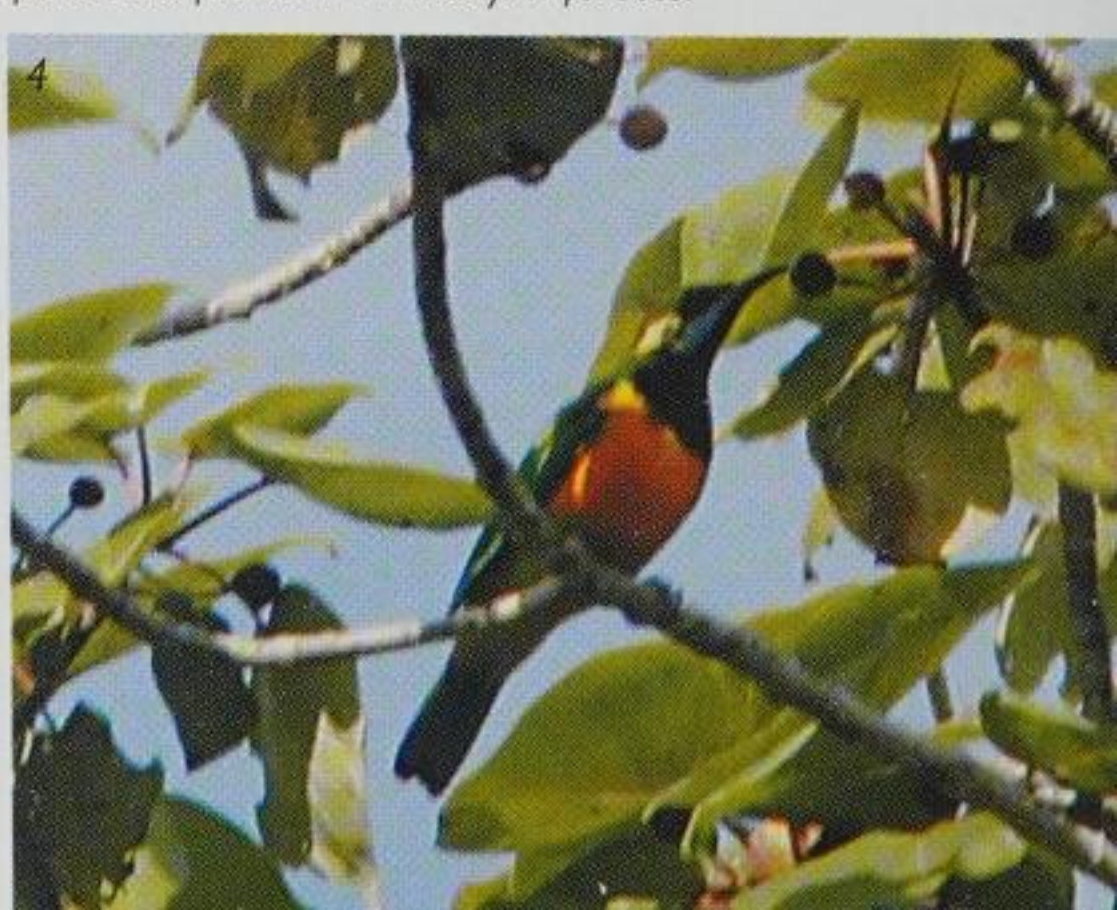
Leafbirds & pittas

Pittas are beautifully coloured squat ground birds of damp forests with strong bills, fairly long legs and short tails. Leafbirds are fruit-eating songbirds that haunt the canopies of trees.

The green-backed **Indian Pitta** (19cm) is salmon in colour on the underparts. It has blue in its wings and tail, and red under the tail. It has a black face-mask that extends to the hind-neck. Calls: a wheezy 'tiuuuw' and a 'wheep-wiyoo'. Like other leafbirds, the **Golden-fronted Leafbird** (19cm) is easily overlooked in dense green foliage with its green plumage. The orange forehead distinguishes it from the **Blue-winged Leafbird** (18cm), which has a broader yellow border around the black-and-blue throat. Note that females merely show some blue on their throats, and only in the NE have blue in the wings. The **Orange-bellied Leafbird** (19cm) is identified by the colour of its belly while the wings and tail are extensively blue. Females only have a trace of blue on the wings and throat that also lacks black.



1 Indian Pittas breed in the Himalaya and C India and winter in the S.
2 Golden-fronted Leafbirds breed in woods in the Himalaya and parts of W, C, S and E India.
3 Blue-winged Leafbirds are resident in forests in most of India apart from the N and NW.
4 Orange-bellied Leafbirds are found in Himalayan forests.

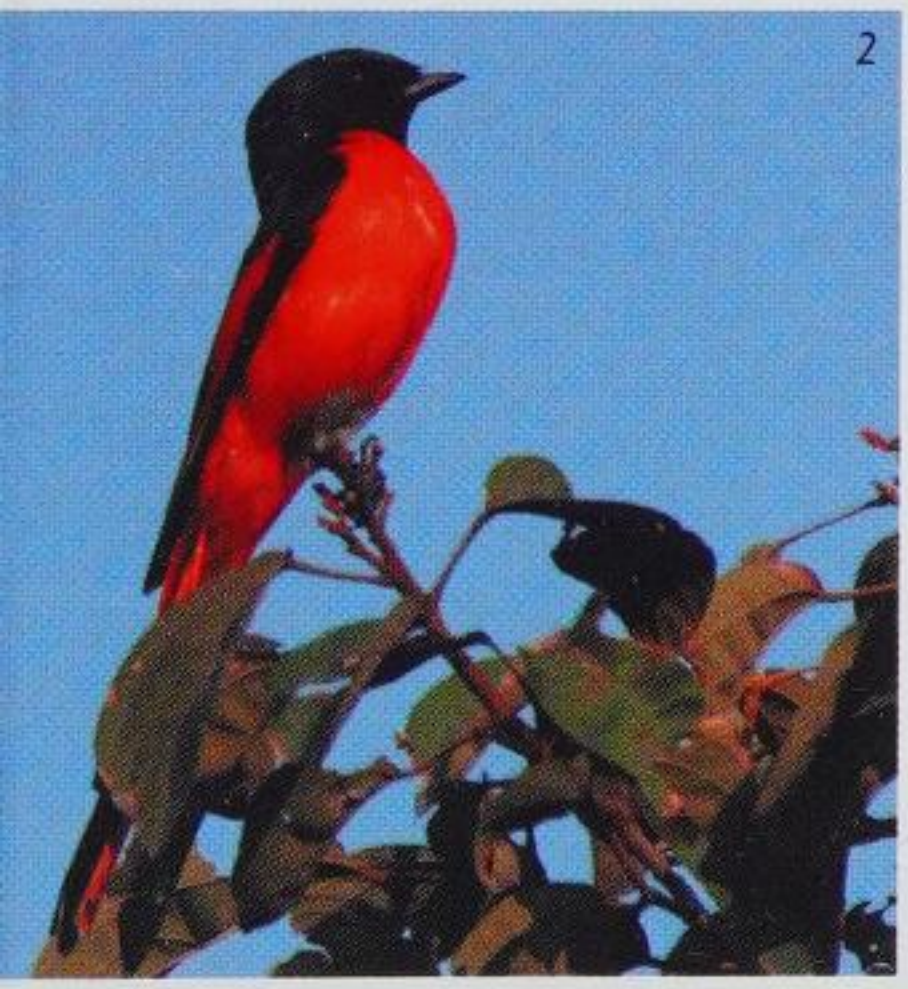


Minivets

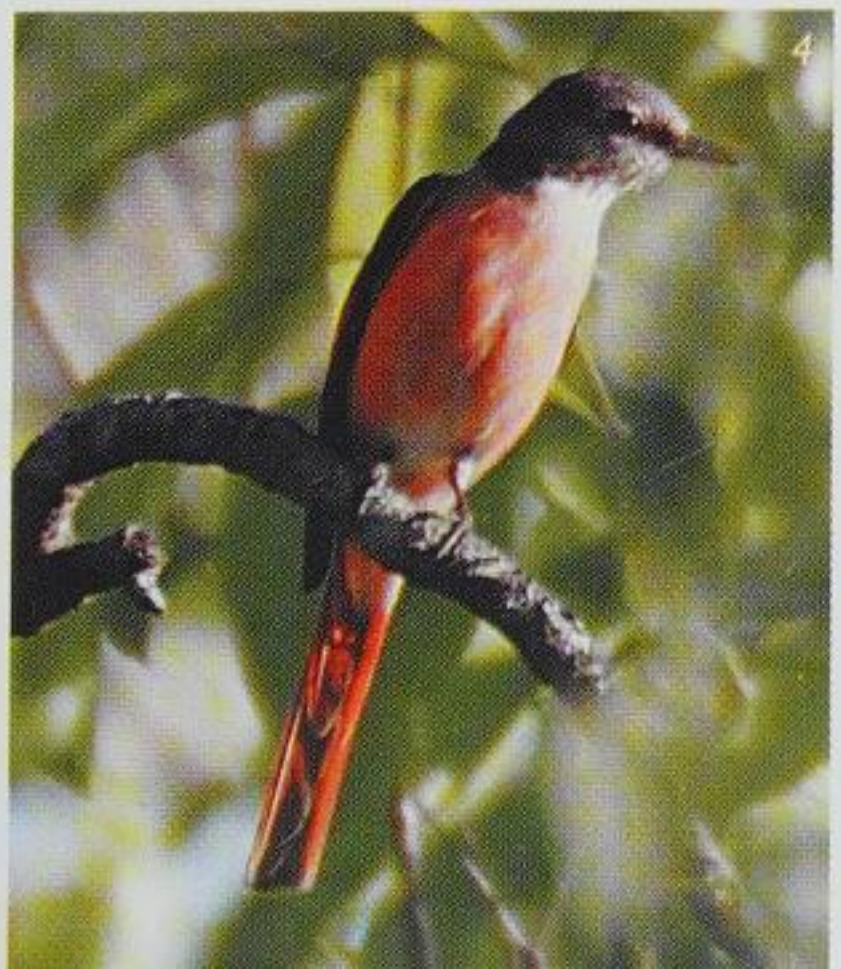
Small Minivets inhabit dry open forest and scrub throughout India.

Elegant insect-eaters, different species of minivets are identifiable by the pattern and coloration of head and wings. Note their elongated bodies and upright stance.

Small Minivets (15cm) are seen in active flocks, keeping contact through soft 'swee, swee' calls. Males have grey backs and combine an orange breast with a yellow belly and a red rump. Females are similar to Long-tailed but smaller and whiter on the chin. Like other minivets, they regularly make aerial sallies to catch insects. The **Long-tailed Minivet** (18cm) is black-and-red in the male and grey-and-yellow in the female (photo p 113). Calls: 'djib, djib' and 'tweet'. Look for the wing pattern in order to distinguish it from the larger **Scarlet Minvet** (21cm). This bird looks very similar and the difference lies in the extra spots of red the male has on the secondaries of the wings. Females are bright yellow below and have spots of yellow on the wings. **Rosy Minivets** (18cm) are pink with grey (male); and yellow and grey with whitish underparts (female).



2 Long-tailed Minivets breed up to 3500m in the Himalaya and winter in the foothills.
3 Scarlet Minivets are found in the SW, C and E and up to 2500m in the Himalaya.
4 Rosy Minivets occur in light forest in the lower Himalaya and E Ghats.
5 Female Scarlet Minivet.



Drongos, woodswallows

Black Drongos live in all types of open country and forest.

Drongos are noisy and fairly quarrelsome birds, overall black in plumage with forked or ornate tails. They inhabit forests and open habitats. Strong bills are used to catch insects and to take nectar from flowers.

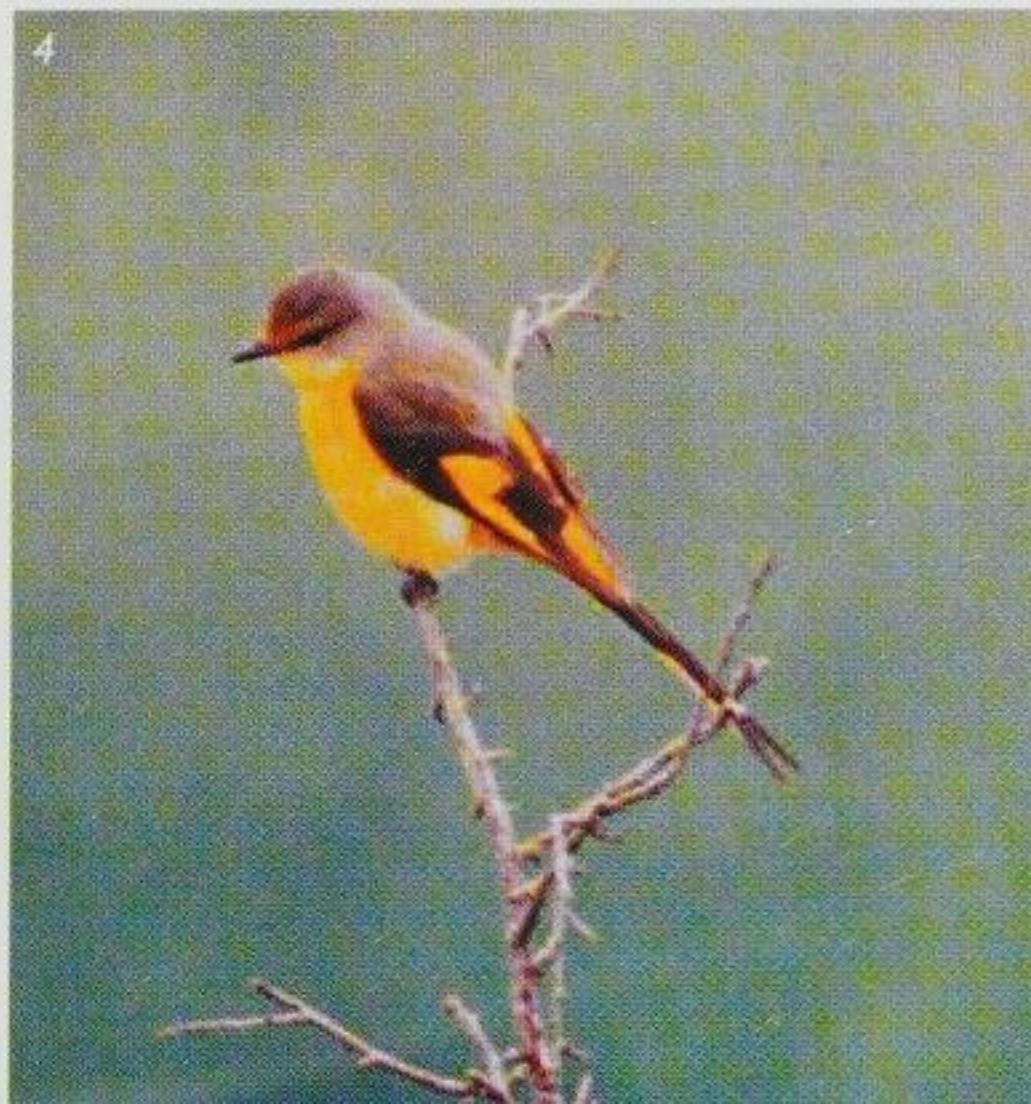
The **Black Drongo** (31cm) is a familiar bird of the Indian countryside. Like other birds it finds perches on wires that criss-cross the landscape. It has a varied repertoire of chatters and a Shikra-like 'ti-tiu'. The somewhat stubbier **White-bellied Drongo** (24cm) is distinct but note that juvenile Black Drongos show white on their belly as well. The **Ashy Drongo** (30cm) is duller dark grey with conspicuous red eyes. The **Bronzed Drongo** (24cm) is like a small Black Drongo with a strong bluish gloss and a less deeply-forked tail. Its repertoire includes surprisingly musical phrases.

2 Ashy Drongos summer in the Himalaya up to the treeline and winter in well-wooded country throughout India.
3 White-bellied Drongos are widely distributed in wooded habitats but are absent in the W and the NE.
4 Bronzed Drongos are seen in the lower Himalaya and in a narrow corridor inland along the E and W coast.

Spangled Drongos live in forests with flowering trees in the Himalayan foothills, S and E India.

The **Spangled Drongo** (31cm) is a large drongo with a strong green gloss on its neck and over its upperparts. It has a crest of thin hairs and the tail tips curve upward. These drongos feed on the nectar of flowering trees and emit metallic calls. The **Greater Racket-tailed Drongo** (33cm) has a characteristic, brushy crest and very long tail streamers that extend from the forked tail. The similar **Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo** (28cm, no photo) has an unforked tail with similar extensions and a smaller crest. C and E Himalaya. The **Ashy Woodswallow** (19cm) is a stocky, short-tailed bird with long, pointed wings. It is grey with a thick, bluish bill. Seen from below the underwings are light while the dark, white-tipped tail contrasts with the light undertail-coverts. After spending time on the wing, catching insects, the birds perch together on exposed branches, often atop tall trees.

2 Greater Racket-tailed Drongos breed in forest and jungle in much of India apart from NW and SE.
3 Ashy Woodswallows are found in open forest habitat in the S and E.
4 Female Long-tailed Minivet (see p 111).



Blue-capped Rock Thrushes breed in Himalayan forests up to 2500m and winter in the W Ghats.

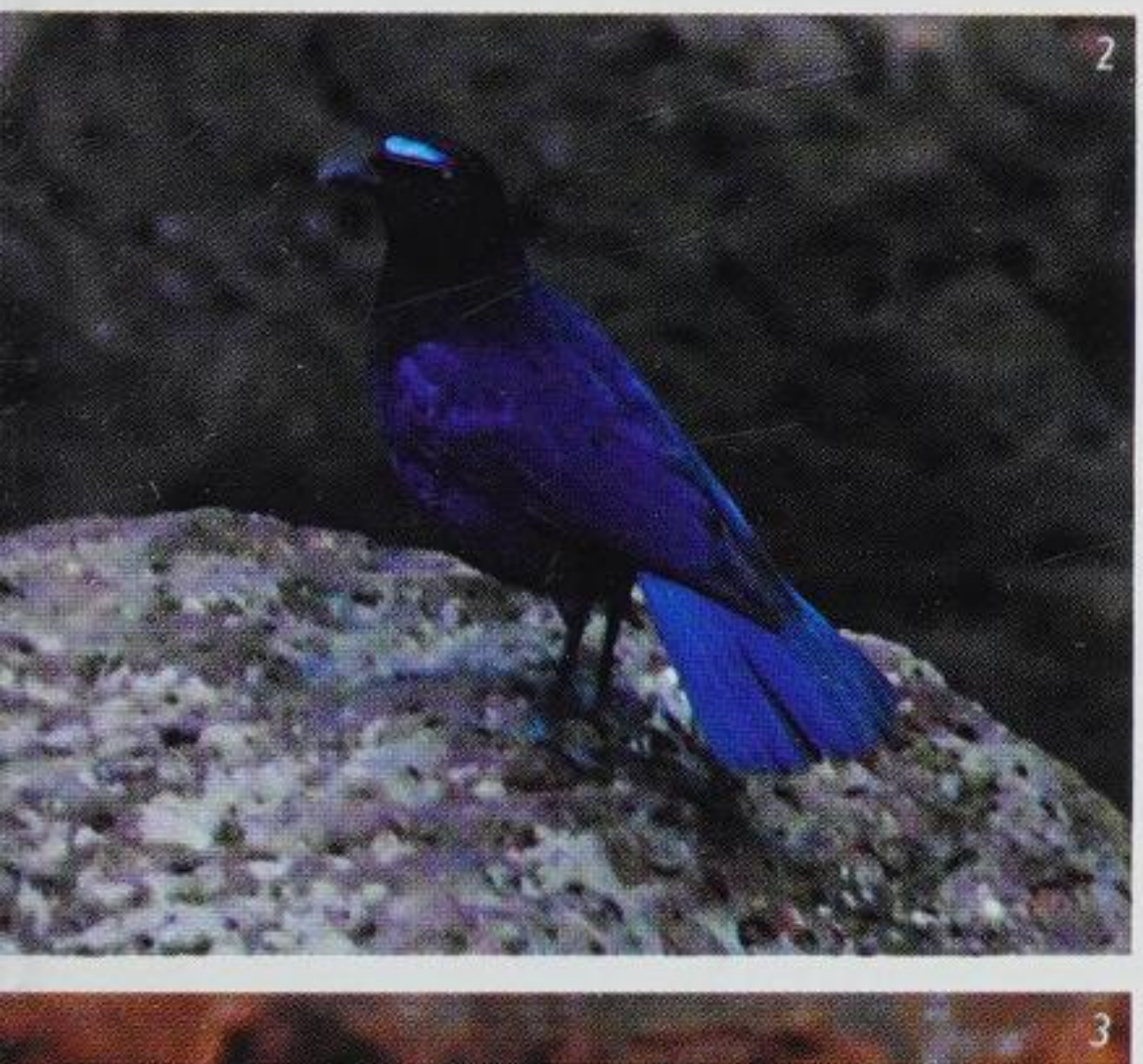
Thrushes

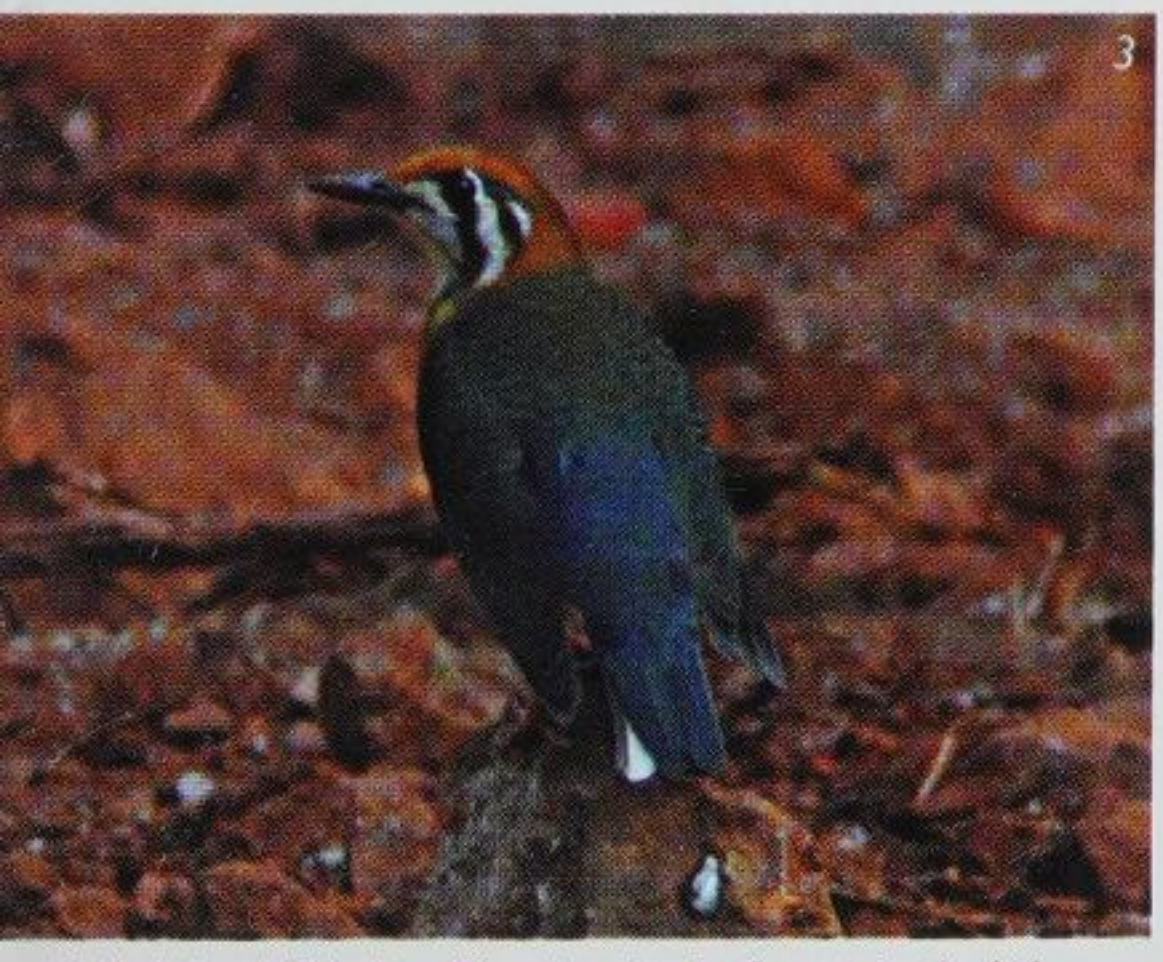
Thrushes are medium-sized songbirds with slender but fairly strong bills that are used to seize insects and consume fruits and berries. When not perched or feeding in trees they are seen hopping around on the floors of the forests they inhabit.

The **Blue-capped Rock Thrush** (17cm) is a familiar summer bird of Himalayan forests. It has a chestnut belly and is distinguished from the next species by its smaller size, the white wing-patch, black back and blue throat. It sings a calm 'tree-tew - tree-tew' etc. The **Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush** (24cm) of the Himalaya is uniformly blue from the crown down over the wings, back and rump. It has red-brown underparts and a black throat. The **Blue Rock Thrush** (23cm) is blue with darker, blackish wings but in winter it is duller bluish-grey. The females of all these three species are brown above and scaly brown-and-buff below, which superficially could make them appear like a Plain-backed Thrush (p 117). Their underparts, however, have a brown ground colour with dense buff lines instead of a light ground colour with distinct black scales. The female Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush has a buff half-moon shape over the ear-coverts.

2 Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrushes breed up to the treeline and winter in the foothills of the Himalaya.
3 Blue Rock Thrushes breed in high NW Himalayan habitats and winter throughout India in stony country, riverbeds and on ruins.
4 Female Blue-capped Rock Thrush.

Blue Whistling Thrushes occur from the Himalayan foothills to the treeline.





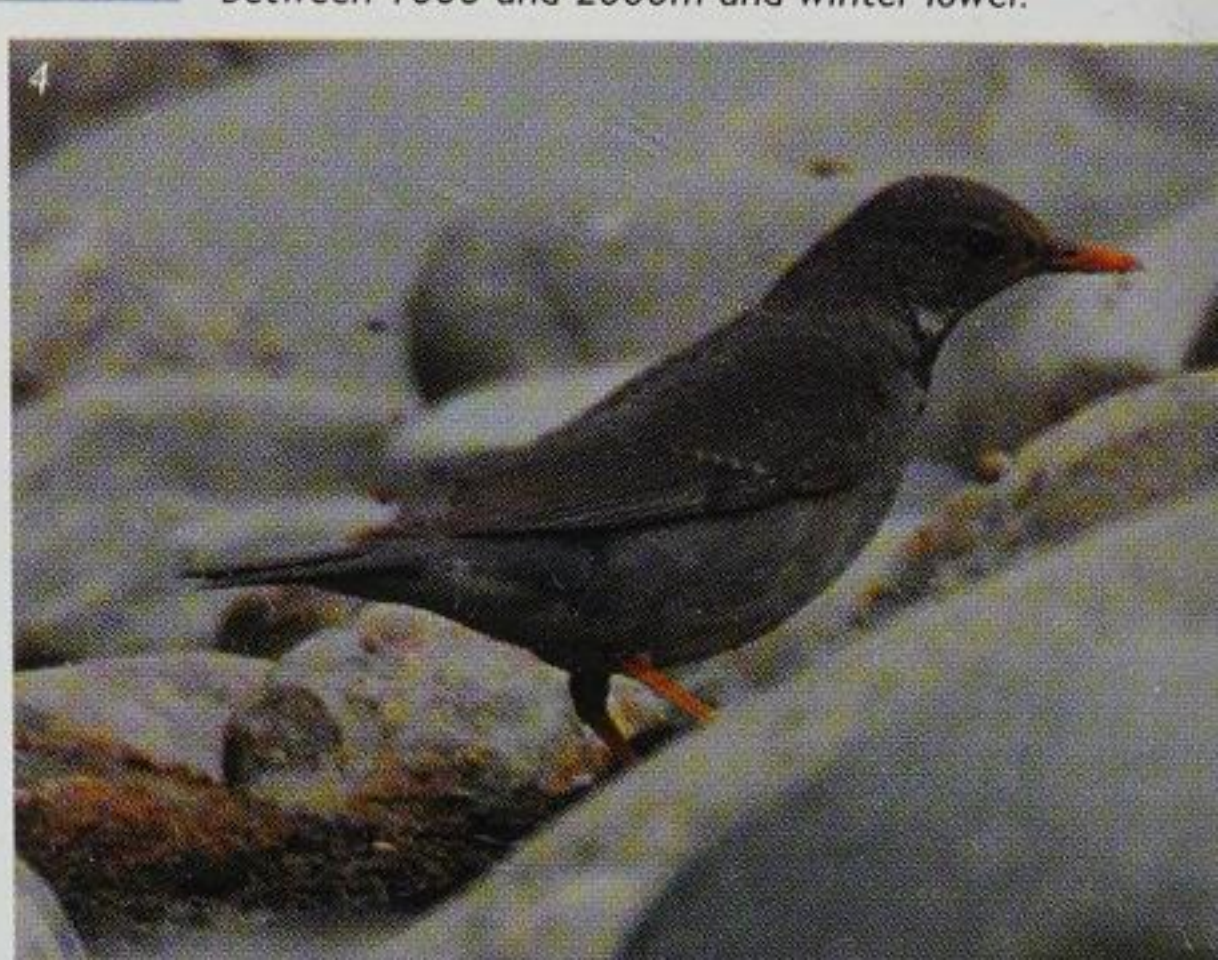
2 Malabar Whistling Thrushes live in forests in the W Ghats.
3 Orange-headed Thrushes breed in well-wooded country in the Himalayan foothills, C and S India.
4 Chestnut Thrushes are found in the higher forests of the W Himalaya.

The **Blue Whistling Thrush** (33cm) is a household name in Himalayan hill stations. Fairly wary by nature, these yellow-billed birds make their presence known by singing their loud, fluty song while flying or sitting on exposed rocks, roofs and trees. When seen in the shady forests that form their main habitat, the blue coloration of the plumage and the light dots are not clear and one is left with the impression of a blackbird. The smaller and darker **Malabar Whistling Thrush** (25cm) lacks speckles and is bright blue on the crown and shoulders. In the high Himalayan mountains the deep blue **Grandala** (23cm, no photo) occurs above the treeline. Note how the black wings and tail contrast with the blue body. The **Orange-headed Thrush** (21cm) is instantly recognisable but note that the race of the Himalaya has a plain orange head while birds in the south look as the bird in the photo. While it is a fairly shy type of bird it will sometimes appear from cover and feed at very close range. **Chestnut Thrushes** (27cm) are striking with their chestnut plumage, dark wings and grey head. Females are a bit duller.

Eurasian Blackbirds occur around the treeline in the Himalaya and in forests in parts of S, C and E India.

Eurasian Blackbirds (26cm) in India come in different races: along the Himalaya the males are black like the blackbirds in Europe while in the south they are dark grey with bluish-grey wings. In peninsular India they look brown with a black cap. Females are brown and light brown below. The **Grey-winged Blackbird** (28cm), like the rest of the species on this page, is found in the Himalaya. It is a fairly shy bird, but when spotted the males are recognised by their black plumage, the yellow bill and grey wing-panel. The female is brown with an indistinct light wing-panel. It emits a mellow song of slowly repeated notes. **Tickell's Thrush** (21cm) is bluish-grey with lighter underparts. The female is like a small female Grey-winged Blackbird but with lighter underparts and a dark moustachial stripe. Male and female **White-collared Blackbirds** (26cm, no photo) are black with a white neck collar and brown with a light neck collar respectively. They inhabit temperate forests up to the treeline.

2 Grey-winged Blackbirds breed from 1700 to over 3000m in the Himalaya and winter down in the foothills.
3 Female Grey-winged Blackbird.
4 Tickell's Thrushes - here a female - breed between 1000 and 2000m and winter lower.



Dark-throated Thrushes winter in forests, gardens and fields in the Himalaya and the adjacent plains.

The **Dark-throated Thrush** (25cm) is a smallish thrush that arrives in large flocks from Russia. It is grey-brown above and whitish below. The black on the throat and upper breast is often reduced to some dark brown stripes and smudges. Calls include a 'sweee' and 'wich-wich-wich'.

The **Mistle Thrush** (28cm) is a large, cold-grey thrush with white underparts dotted with black. These are more spotted than the scaling of the next three species. Its habits are much less hidden and it has a loud, rattling call. The withdrawn **Scaly Thrush** (26cm) is the only thrush with scaling on both upper- and underparts. Note the golden wash to the plumage. The even shier **Plain-backed Thrush** (27cm) is densely scaled below and has olive-brown upperparts. The scales are more crescent-shaped than on the similar **Long-tailed Thrush** (27cm), which also has clearer buff wing-bars. The **Long-billed Thrush** (28cm, no photo) of damp Himalayan forests is very dark above with a very long bill, dark breast and dark spots on the belly.

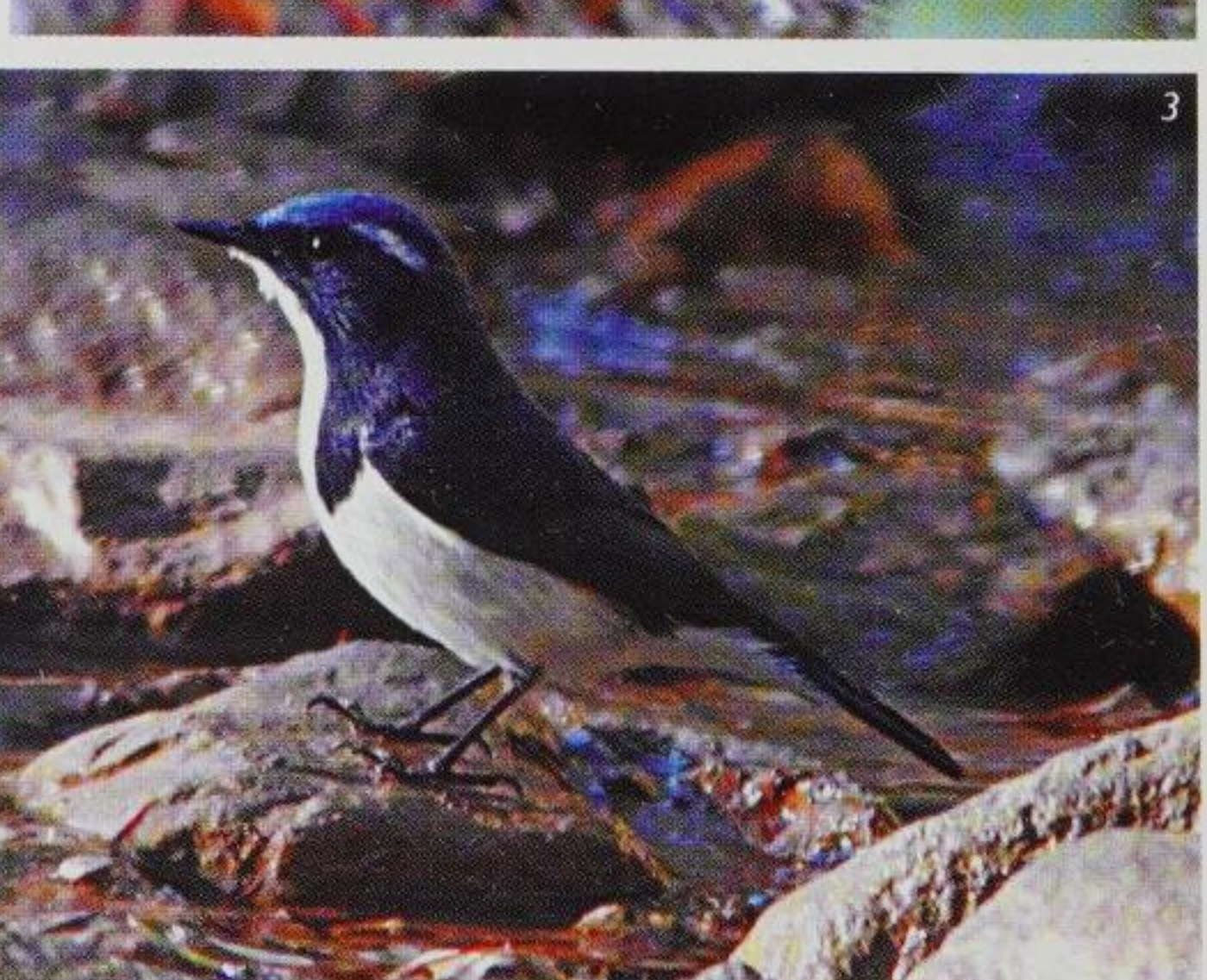
2 Mistle Thrushes breed around the treeline and in conifer forests in the Himalaya.
3 Scaly Thrushes are confined to leafy and humus-rich Himalayan forest floors. They winter in the foothills, the W Ghats and E India.
4 Plain-backed Thrushes inhabit open Himalayan forests up to the treeline.
5 Long-tailed Thrushes occur in similar habitat.

Flycatchers

Male Slaty-blue Flycatcher.

Small insectivorous birds of forests and gardens. Many species use exposed branches from which to make aerial sorties in order to catch insects, while a few species feed on the ground.

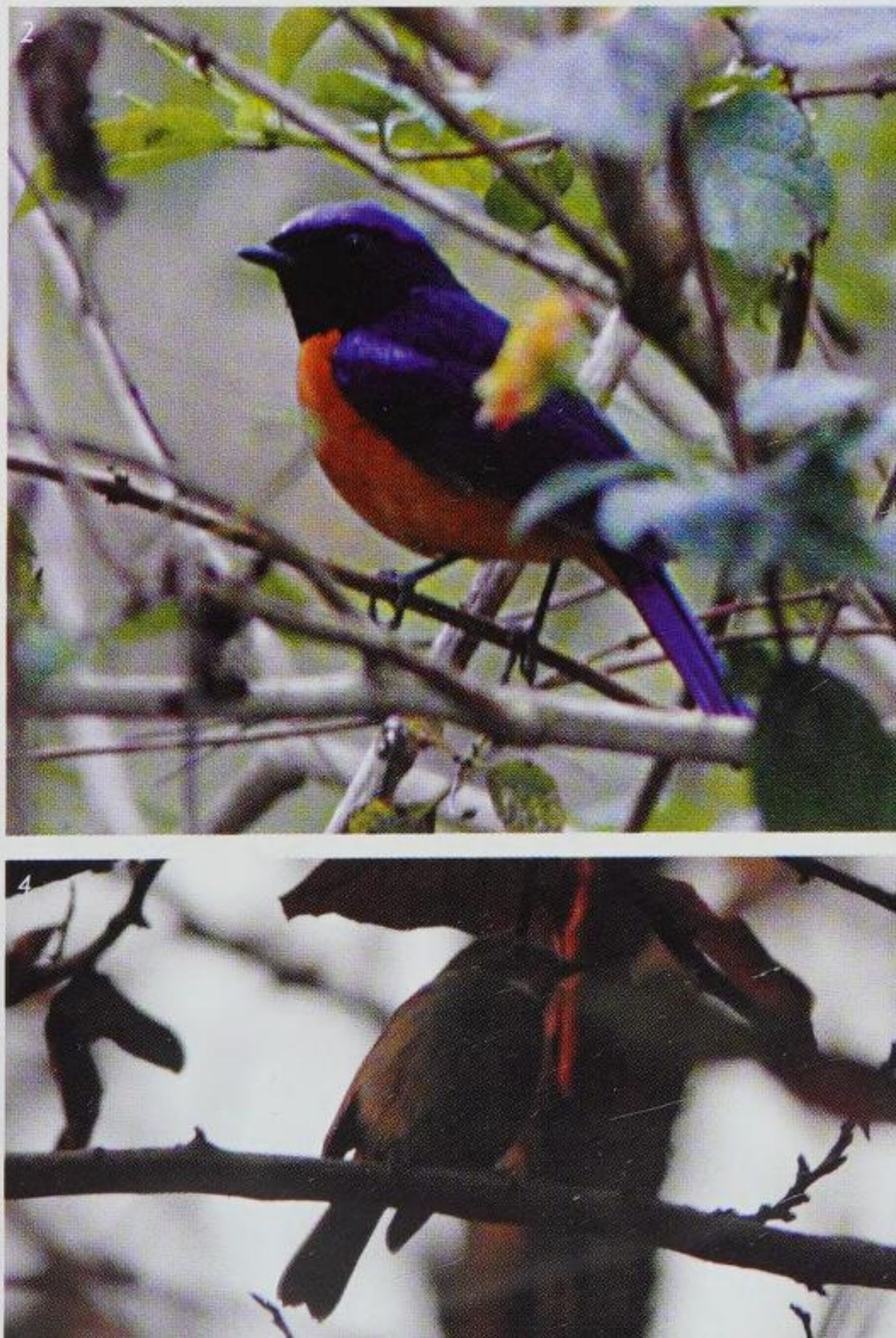
The **Slaty-blue Flycatcher** (10cm) keeps to low trees and bushes. The male is dark blue with a brighter crown. The white underparts show dark blue patches on the sides of the breast. Note also the white sides of the tail-base. The female is brown with a rusty tail. Could be mistaken for a Rusty-tailed Flycatcher (see p 122) but more compact and has the habit of cocking its tail and drooping its wings. Call: a harsh metallic 'tack'. **Ultramarine Flycatchers** (10cm) are bright blue with blue on the side of the breast. They normally don't feed on the ground. Females are grey-brown with light underparts. Call: a high 'trrrr'.



2 Slaty-blue Flycatchers - here a female - breed up to 4000m in the Himalaya and winter in the foothills.
3 Ultramarine Flycatchers summer up to 3000m in the Himalaya and winter in the plains.
4 Female Ultramarine Flycatcher.

Rufous-gorgeted Flycatchers breed between 2000 and 4000m in the S Himalaya.

The **Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher** (13cm) has a characteristic plumage. The female doesn't have a black throat and has virtually no orange. Both sexes have white sides to the base of the tail. The **Rufous-bellied Niltava** (15cm) looks like the Blue-throated Flycatcher but the orange extends from the breast all the way down to the belly. Females are brown with a white gorget. Its song starts with a short metallic grinding. The **Little Pied Flycatcher** (10cm) is easily identified. The female is grey-brown with a warm-brown tail.



2 Rufous-bellied Niltavas breed up to 3000m in evergreen forests in the Himalaya; winter down in the foothills.
3 Little Pied Flycatchers are found in the C and E Himalaya.
4 Female Rufous-bellied Niltava.

Male Blue-throated Flycatcher.

The **Blue-throated Flycatcher** (14cm) has a characteristic plumage that differs from the next species only in its blue throat. Females are brown with an orange breast. The male **Tickell's Blue Flycatcher** (14cm) is very similar but note that the orange of the breast extends to the throat. Females differ by having blue upperparts and buff underparts. The **White-bellied Blue Flycatcher** (15cm, see photo p 121) is bright blue like the Verditer Flycatcher (p 121) but with a white belly. The female is brown with an orange breast and throat. Restricted to the region of the W Ghats in the far south, the similar **Nilgiri Flycatcher** (15cm, no photo) lacks the white belly but has some dark grey on the under-belly. The female is dark grey with a bluish cast.

2 Tickell's Blue Flycatchers are all-India residents that breed in dry forests but are absent in the NW.
3 Female Red-throated Flycatcher (see p 122).
4 Blue-throated Flycatchers - here a female - breed in forest with undergrowth up to 2000m in the Himalaya and winter in the SW.

Verditer Flycatchers summer in the Himalaya up to 3500m and winter in peninsular India.

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The **Verditer Flycatcher** (15cm) is a common and brilliantly-coloured flycatcher of The Himalaya, the female a duller version of the male. The song is a pleasant warble. The **Black-naped Monarch** (16cm) is also blue with a grey-white belly in both sexes. The black nape and fine black line over the throat set this species apart. It calls a 'wich-wich-wich'. The **Small Niltava** (11cm) is dark blue with a grey belly and lighter blue on crown and side of the neck. The female is brown with a bit of blue on the neck. It sings a high, thin song.

2 Juvenile Verditer Flycatcher.
3 Black-naped Monarchs are resident in much of India apart from the NW.
4 Small Niltavas are residents of evergreen forests in the C and E Himalaya.
5 White-bellied Blue Flycatchers are found in the W Ghats.

5

Red-throated Flycatchers winter in open wooded areas, hedges and bushes near fields etc. throughout the subcontinent apart from the far south.

Winter sees the arrival of **Red-throated Flycatchers** (13cm). They are dull-coloured birds with white sides to the tail and an orange throat in the male. It cocks up its tail a lot and gives away its presence by a dry 'trrrt' or high 'tseet'. The **Dark-sided Flycatcher** (13cm) looks tiny from its perches - typically atop a tree - from which it makes long sorties. It is entirely dull grey but look for the narrow light area over the middle of the breast. The similar **Asian Brown Flycatcher** (14cm) looks more elongated. It is uniformly brown with light underparts. The **Rusty-tailed Flycatcher** (14cm) is very similar but note the red-brown tail and its habitual skulking in low trees.

2

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2 Dark-sided Flycatchers breed in Himalayan forests between 2000 and 3500m.
3 Asian Brown Flycatchers breed in the W Ghats and Himalayan foothills up to 2000m. They winter in S India.
4 Rusty-tailed Flycatchers inhabit forests in the Himalaya from 2000 to 3500m.

4

Grey-headed Canary Flycatchers breed in the Himalaya up to 3000m and the W Ghats, and winter in the N Indian plains.

In winter the **Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher** (9cm) is a colourful addition to the birds of the N Indian plains with its yellow and grey plumage and loud 'tit-tit-tit-tit' call. The **Yellow-bellied Fantail** (8cm) is a tiny bird of horizontal carriage that supports a white-tipped, black tail that is fanned out while the bird turns around in half-circles. It calls a high 'tit'. The **White-throated Fantail** (17cm) is a larger, black version with a white supercilium and throat. It has a characteristic 'tit-tit-tittittit' song, the second syllable ascending and then descending. The S Indian race has a white belly and looks almost identical to the **White-browed Fantail** (17cm) that differs by having a much wider white eyebrow, a dark throat with a white line and two rows of fine white spotting on the wings.

2 Yellow-bellied Fantails breed up to 3500m in the Himalaya and winter in the foothills.
3 White-throated Fantails inhabit woods and gardens in C and S India and up to 2000m in the Himalaya.
4 The White-browed Fantail is resident in most of the subcontinent.

Chats

Bluethroats winter throughout India apart from the extreme S.

A diverse group of small- to medium-sized birds that keep to the ground mostly when feeding on insects and berries. Robins, redstarts, forktails and wheatears are included in this group.

Skulky though it sometimes can be, the **Bluethroat** (15cm) is a pleasant addition to the various wintering songbirds in the Indian plains in winter. After being detected by its soft 'tack-tack' call it will often show itself and can appear at close range from bushes and marshy vegetation. Look for the red sides of the base of the tail, which gives the species away when it is flushed. The female doesn't have the black, blue, red and white throat pattern of the male. The **Indian Blue Robin** (15cm) is a handsome Himalayan summer breeder. Its song somewhat resembles that of the European Nightingale. Females are olive above and buff below with a white throat and rufous on the tail. The **White-tailed Rubythroat** (15cm) is dark with a scarlet-centred, black throat and a white supercilium. Its 'tack' call is softer than that of the Bluethroat. Females are grey-brown with grey breast and white throat. The **Siberian Rubythroat** (15cm, no photo) is similar but without black on the breast and with a broad, white moustachial stripe. It winters in the E Himalayan foothills and Bangladesh.

2 Indian Blue Robins breed in the Himalaya up to 3300m and winter in the W Ghats.
3 White-tailed Rubythroats summer around and above the treeline in the Himalaya and winter in the foothills.
4 Female Pied Bushchat (see p 130).

Orange-flanked Bush Robins breed in open forest close to the treeline and winter in wooded habitat from 600m to over 2000m.

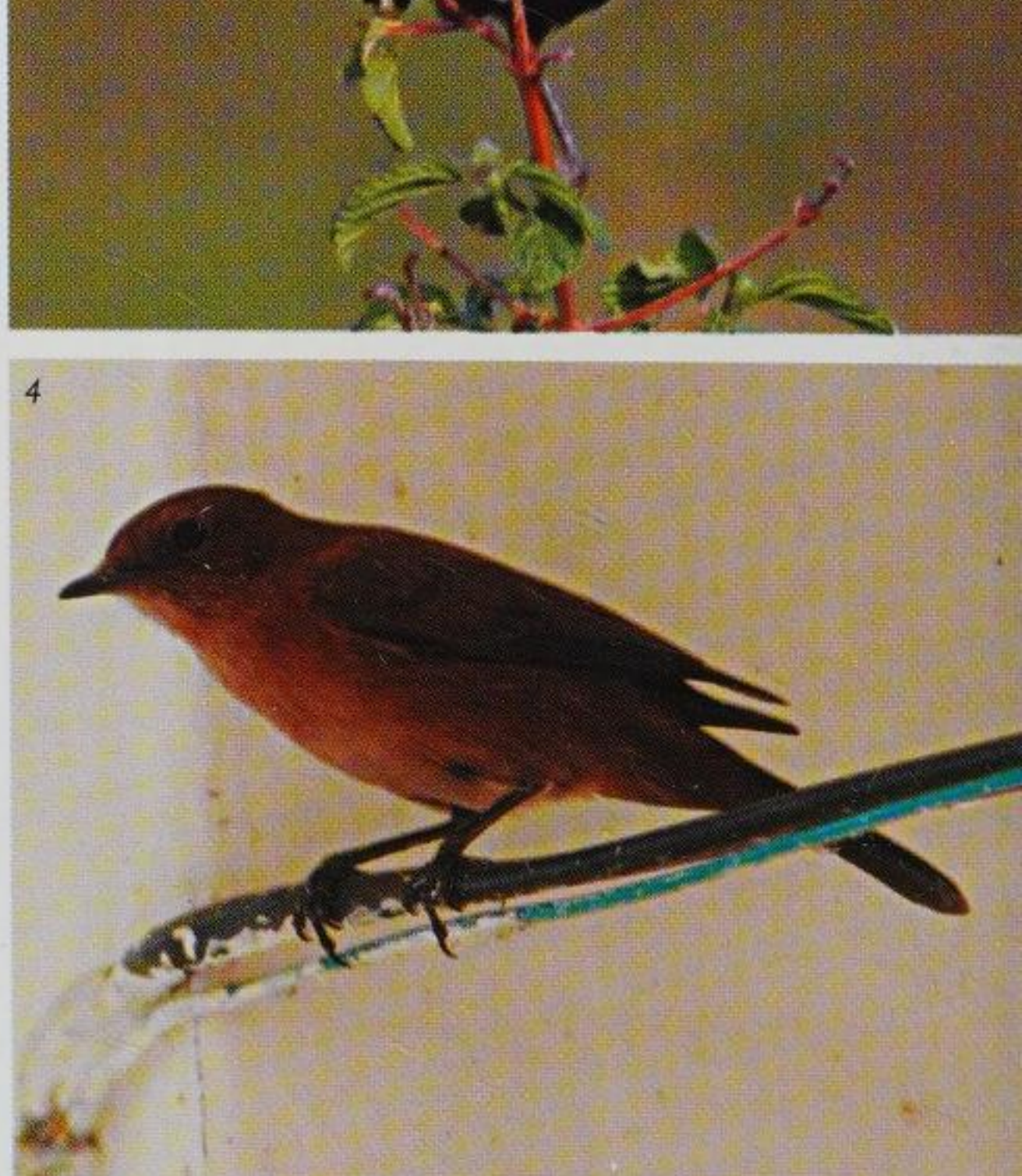
The male **Orange-flanked Bush Robin** (15cm) has blue upperparts with a hint of blue on the sides of the breast. Note the orange flanks in both sexes. Females are otherwise brown above and light below. It is easy to view when in wintering habit, where it calls a 'trek-trek' and 'hueet' and frequently leaves the cover of bushes and forest undergrowth to venture in search for food. The **Golden Bush Robin** (15cm) is the only bright yellow bird with green-black upperparts. The female is much duller. They are shier than other chats and more confined to the cover of undergrowth. Note the characteristic 'kirk' and 'feet' call.

2 Golden Bush Robins breed above the treeline and winter in subtropical forests of the foothills.
3 Female Orange-flanked Bush Robin.
4 Female Golden Bush Robin.

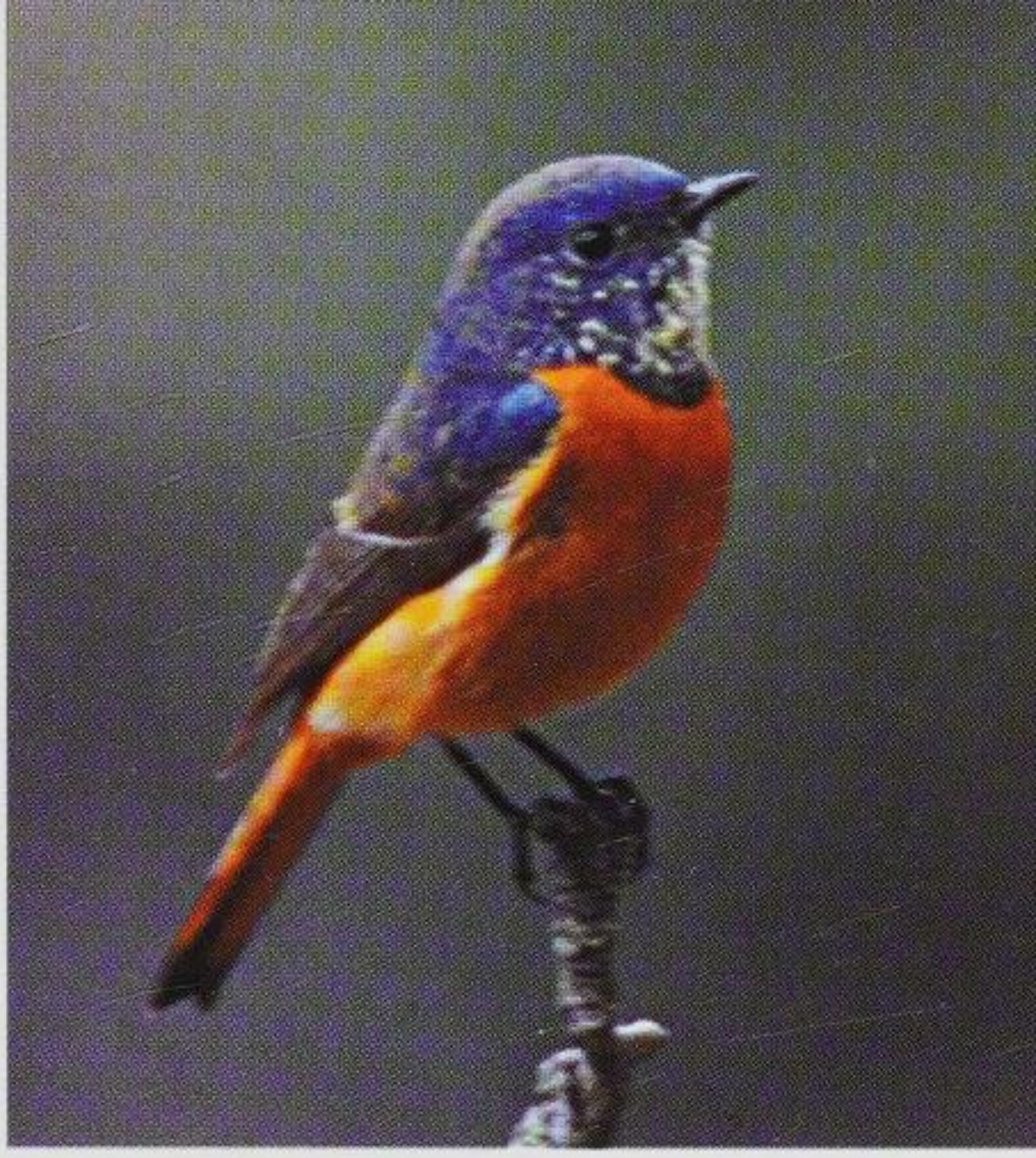
Oriental Magpie Robins are resident in all types of woodland and gardens throughout India.

The **Oriental Magpie Robin** (20cm) is an energetic and pleasantly vocal resident of town gardens and open woodland. The black of the male on the head and chest is replaced by grey in the female. Like a true robin, it frequently cocks up its tail and can be quite aggressive. The **Indian Robin** (16cm) is black with orange on the under-belly and undertail with a white shoulder-patch. The female is light brown with orange under the tail. The **Brown Rock-chat** (17cm) is always found near buildings; old ruins but also new constructions in compounds in places like New Delhi. It is entirely chocolate-brown and sings a pleasant mimicking song.

2 Indian Robins are found in open habitats throughout India year-round.
3 Female Indian Robin.
4 Brown Rock-chats are resident in NW India up to the base of the Himalayan foothills.



Black Redstarts winter in open woodland and near fields throughout India apart from the S. They breed in the high Himalaya.



Blue-fronted Redstarts breed up to the treeline in the Himalaya and winter in the foothills.

The **Black Redstart** (15cm) shows a typical black-and-red redstart plumage without any white in the wings. The black of the head and upperparts sets it apart from other species such as the similar **Blue-fronted Redstart** (15cm), which is dark blue where the previous is black. The females of both species are brown with red tail and both have 'takking' calls typical for robins and redstarts. The **Blue-capped Redstart** (15cm) is black with a bluish-grey cap and white wing-bars. The belly is white and the tail is not red in the male. The female is grey-brown with red on the uppertail.

3 Blue-capped Redstarts are restricted to the W and C Himalaya.
4 Female Blue-fronted Redstart.
5 Female Blue-capped Redstart.
6 Female Black Redstart.

White-capped Water Redstarts breed along Himalayan mountain streams to over 5000m and winter down in the foothills.

White-capped Water Redstarts (19cm) are the treat of a holiday in the Himalaya. While largely confined to streams in summer, this delightful bird stays near homes in open mountain habitat in winter. The plumage is clearly identifiable while its high, loud, drawn-out calls will draw attention. **Plumbeous Water Redstart**s (12cm) of similar habitat keep more strictly to streams and surrounding fields, but are easily identified in such habitats by the characteristic plumage of the male and the more cryptic feathering of the female. Both like to sit upright while regularly wagging their tail. The **White-winged Redstart** (18cm) only occurs in Trans-Himalayan habitat and is therefore reserved for a birding holiday in regions such as Ladakh. Note that the female - apart from her large size - looks like most other female redstarts while the male could be confused for the White-capped Water Redstart, but note the white area in the wings and the completely red tail (lacking the black tail end of the other species).

2 Plumbeous Water Redstarts, here a male, occupy territories in exactly the same habitat.
3 Female Plumbeous Water Redstart.
4 White-winged Redstarts breed between 3000 and 5000m.

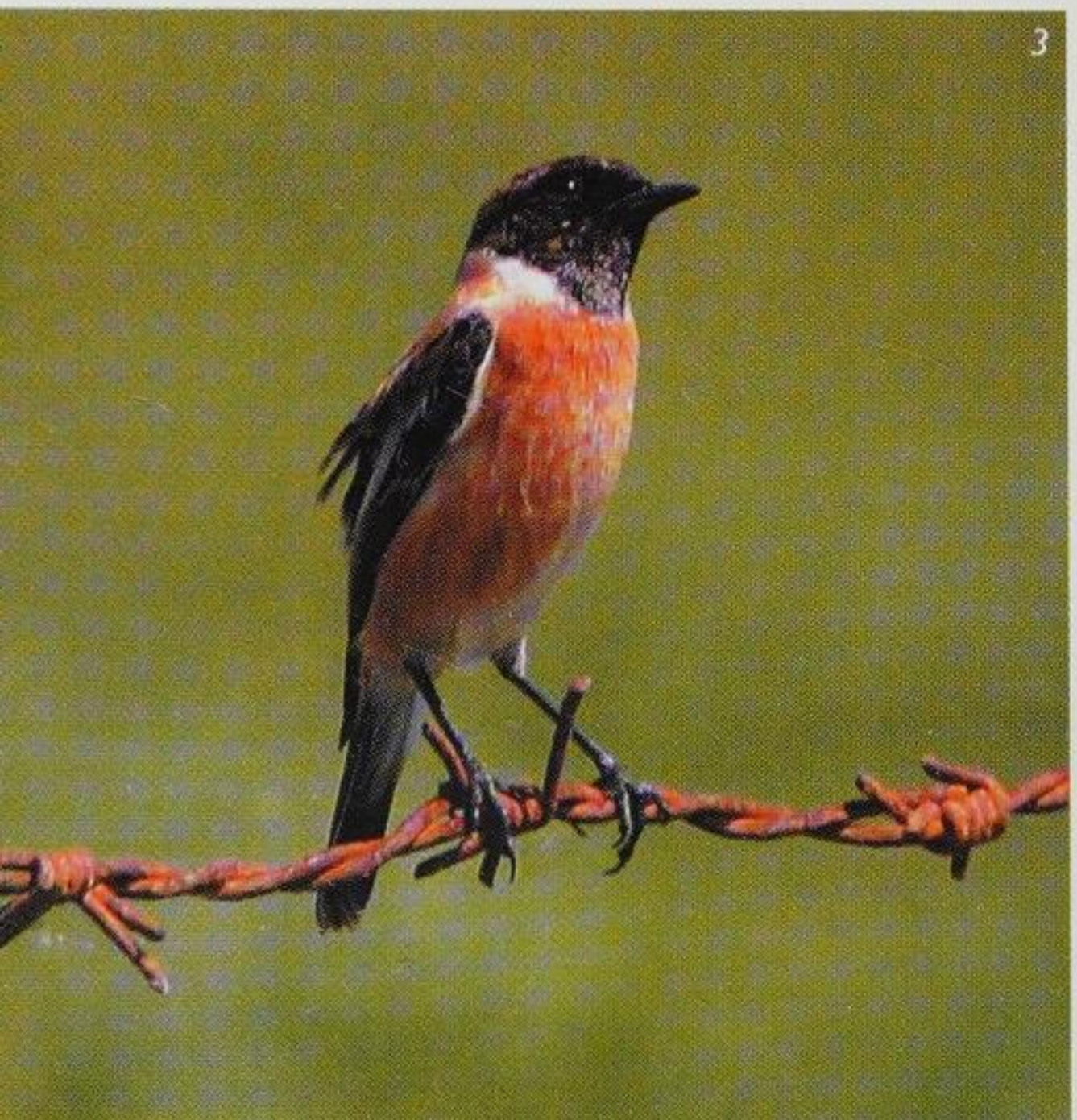
Brown Dippers breed from 500m to the treeline all along the Himalaya.

The plump brown bird seen walking in and out of the ice-cold water of rushing streams in the Himalaya is the **Brown Dipper** (20cm). In some areas its range overlaps that of the **White-throated Dipper** (20cm, no photo) that differs in its white underparts and slaty-black upperparts. The **Little Forktail** (12cm) is a cute little friend of the dipper, breeding along the same streams. Note the short tail and absence of spotting. **Spotted Forktails** (25cm) are larger and noisier and venture a bit further away from the larger streams while feeding. Their spotting separates them from species such as the **Slaty-backed Forktail** (25cm) and **Black-backed Forktail** (25cm, no photo), whose names indicate the colours of their backs.

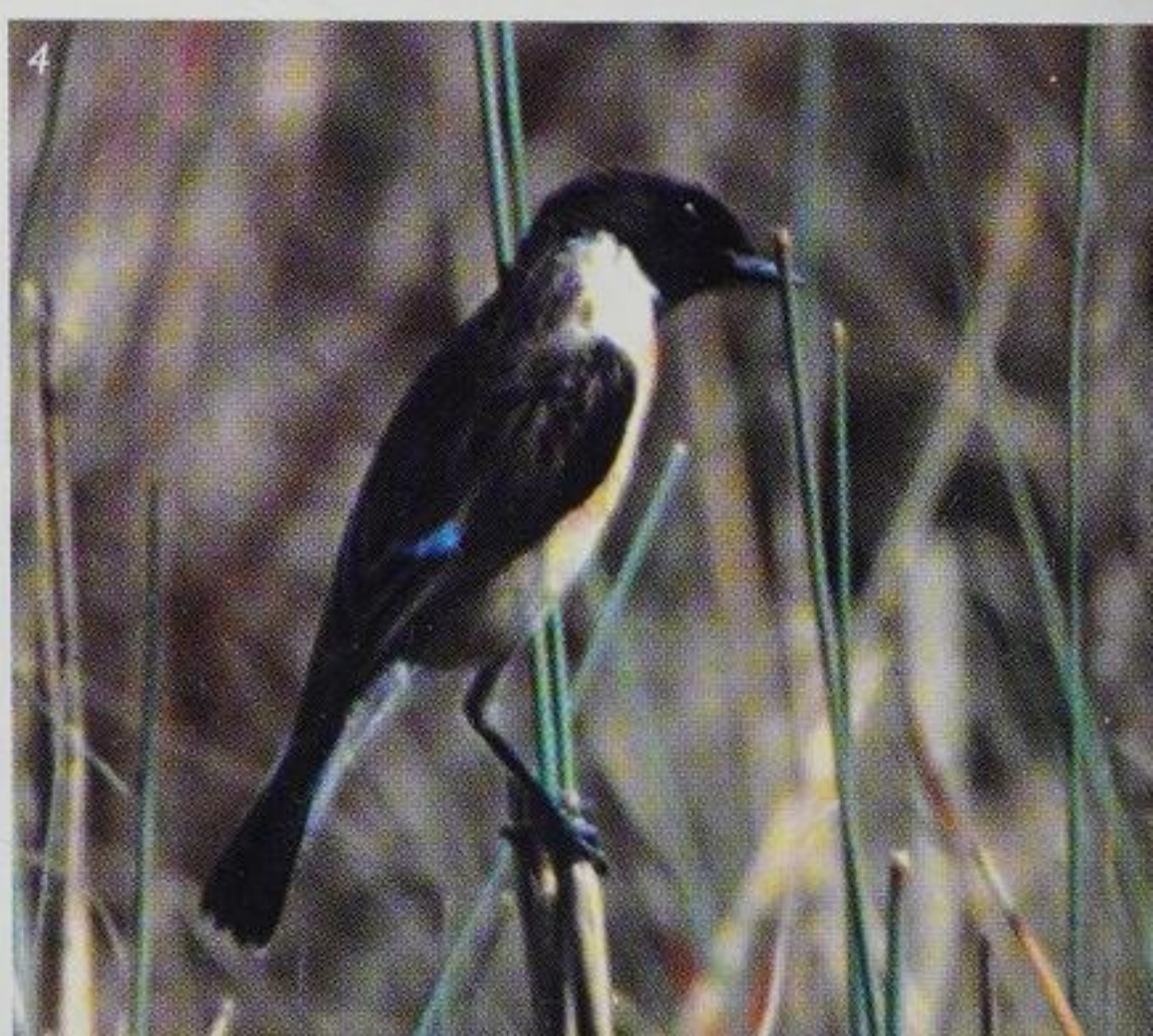
2 Little Forktails are found along currents both at fairly low altitudes as well as up to the treeline.
3 Slaty-backed Forktails breed along streams at lower altitudes of the C and E Himalaya.
4 Spotted Forktails inhabit streams in forested habitat between 1000 and 3500m in the Himalaya.

Grey Bushchats breed in open habitat from around 1500m up to the treeline, and winter in the foothills.

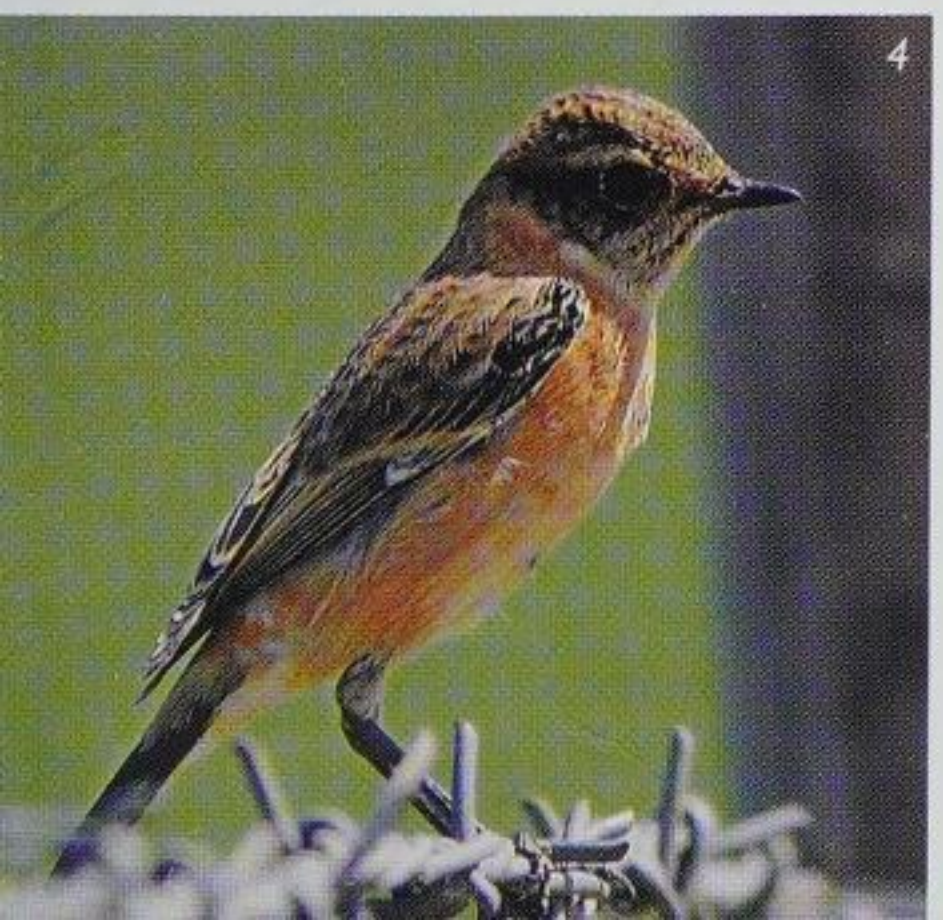
The **Grey Bushchat** (15cm) is a common resident and altitude migrant of the Himalaya. The male is grey above with dark streaking, a white wing-bar and a black face-mask. The female is brown with a rusty tail, making it possible for it to be mistaken for a redstart (see photo p 131). Its call is a warble that ends in a trill. **Pied Bushchats** (13cm) are black with white on the under-belly, vent and in bars on the wing. The female (see photo p 124) is brown with a reddish rump. The **Common Stonechat** (13cm) has a black head bordered with a white collar. It has varying amounts of red on the breast. Females are duller; they lack black in the face and are streaked brown above. (see photo p 131). **White-tailed Stonechats** (13cm) differ from Common by the extensive white in their tail, but watch out for some races of the Common Stonechat which show considerable white in the tail.



2 Pied Bushchats are resident in most of the subcontinent. They prefer open woodland and cultivation.
3 Common Stonechats breed in the Himalaya and winter in open areas throughout the subcontinent apart from the far S.
4 White-tailed Stonechats breed in marshes in the N Indian terai and along Pakistan's rivers.

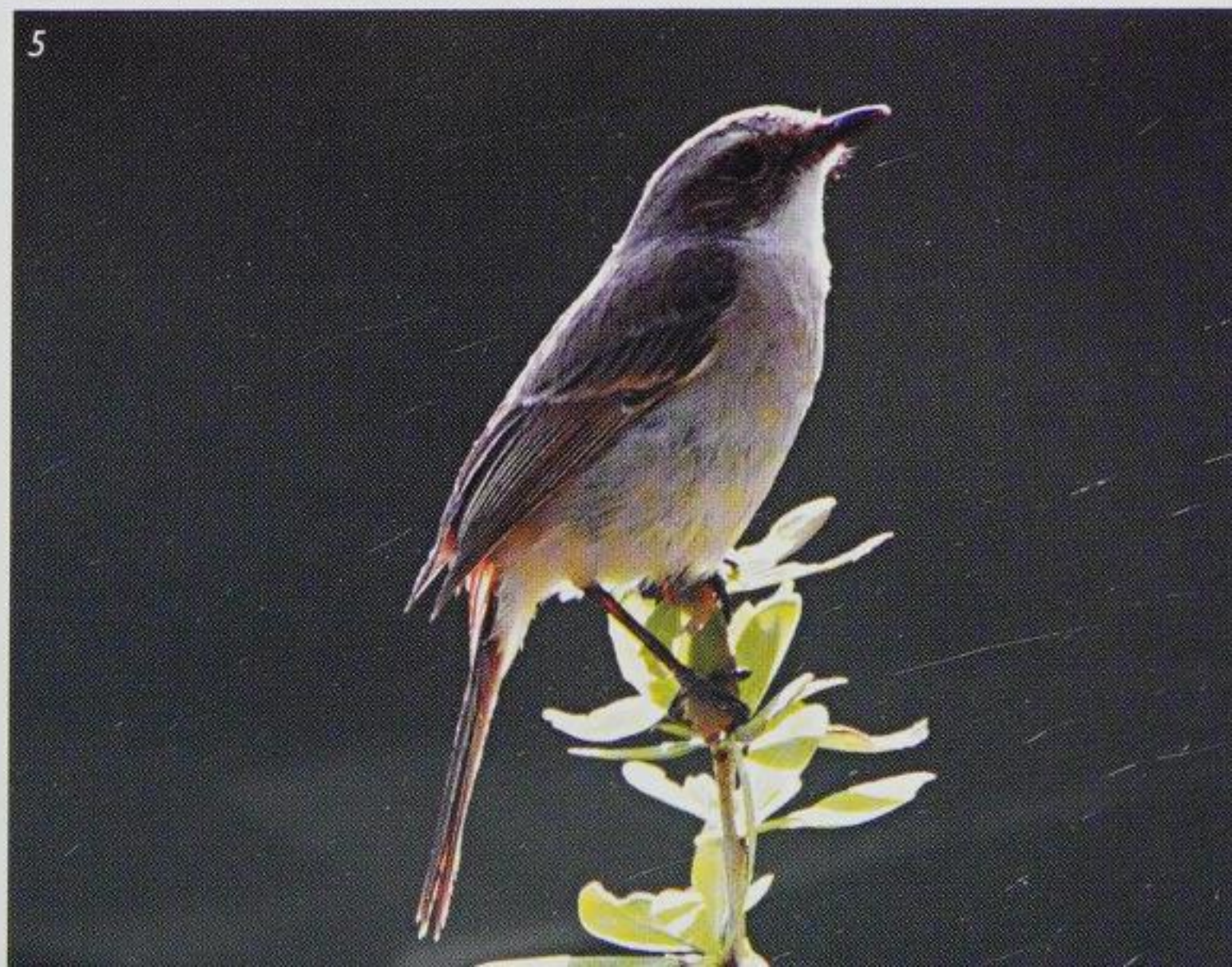


Desert Wheatears breed in Ladakh and winter in NW India.



The **Desert Wheatear** (15cm) is the commonest of the wheatears - birds of arid country and (semi-)desert. It is sandy-brown with black face and wings. Note the white rump but fully black tail. In females and juveniles the black parts are much lighter. The **Variable Wheatear** (16cm) is black with different races allowing variable amounts of white on the belly, rump and crown. Females are brown with varying amounts of white on the underparts. The sides of the base of the tail are white, like in the **Isabelline Wheatear** (16cm), which is light sandy-brown. It looks like a female Desert Wheatear but note the absence of dark in the wings, the more upright stance and heavier bill.

2 Variable Wheatears winter in the NW.
3 Isabelline Wheatears winter in the NW and breed in the hills of C Pakistan.
4 Female Common Stonechat (see p 130).
5 Female Grey Bushchat (see p 130).



Mynas & Starlings

Brahminy Starlings are found in gardens, village groves and open forest throughout India.

Familiar birds of towns, villages and rural cultivation, with some species preferring more natural and forested habitats. They feed on insects, fruits and - in case of the town-dwelling species - benefit from whatever humans discard.

The **Brahminy Starling** (22cm), though not as abundant as the next two species, is a familiar and widely-distributed bird. It produces noisy calls like other species in this family while the song is full of mimicry. Juveniles are duller than adults but have a similar black cap. The **Common Myna** (23cm) with brown plumage, large white wing-patches and yellow face-patch is a common sight throughout the subcontinent. **Jungle Mynas** (23cm) are blackish-grey with white wing-patches, a tuft on the forehead and conspicuous yellow iris. **Asian Pied Starlings** (23cm) are a fairly common sight in the N. Their rolling calls give them away from a distance and on foggy winter mornings.

2 Common Mynas are largely urban.
3 Jungle Mynas prefer gardens and open forest in the SW, E and in the Himalayan foothills, but are also seen in towns.
4 Asian Pied Starlings frequent fields, wetlands and towns in N, C and E India.

Bank Mynas are common in towns and villages throughout India apart from the Himalaya and S India.

The **Bank Myna** (21cm) is similar to the Common Myna and partly replaces it in villages and urban areas in the Northern plains. It is grey with an orange bill, face-patch and wing-panel. The **Chestnut-tailed Starling** (21cm) is a handsome bird of more naturally forested habitats. It is grey above and chestnut below while the head is white. The glossy-black summer plumage of the **Common Starling** (19cm) turns dull in winter and is then dotted all over with light spots. The similar **Rosy Starling** (23cm) is black with pink on back, rump and underparts that turn buff in winter. Juveniles are entirely brown like Common Starling juveniles but in a much lighter shade. Note the cryptic winter plumage seen in the photo. The black **Hill Myna** (25cm) has unique yellow wattles on the cheek, nape and over the crown. The species is now split into separate species in the SW and N to NE. Unlike other mynas this species has a repertoire of surprisingly musical flutes and whistles.

2 Chestnut-tailed Starlings breed in open forests and gardens of the Himalayan foothills, the E and SW. They also winter in C and the rest of S India.
3 Common Starlings are found in similar habitats with cultivation and trees, in the N and NW.
4 Rosy Starlings - here in winter plumage - winter in parts of S, W and C India and are seen on migration in the NW.
5 Hill Mynas - here the Southern Hill Myna - are breeding residents of tropical forest with tall trees in the W Ghats and (Common Hill Myna) of the C and E Himalaya.

Tits, nuthatches & treecreepers

Great Tits live in open forests and gardens along the Himalaya and in parts of C, E and SW India.

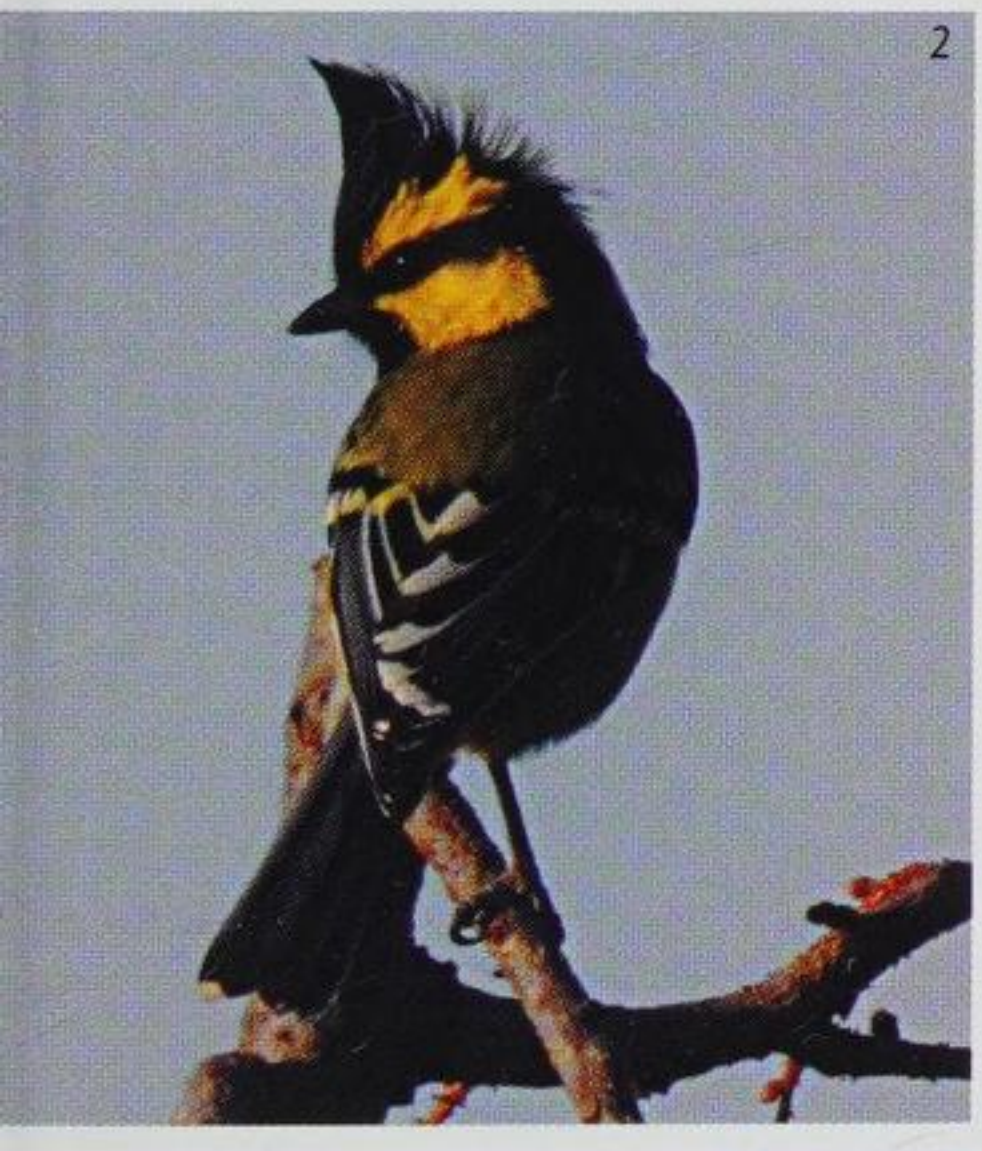
Tits are active birds of forests and gardens that augment their diet of seeds with insects in summer. They breed in hollows in trees. Nuthatches do so as well and distinguish themselves by always clinging to trunks and branches.

The distinctive **Great Tit** (13cm) is one of the few tits that have a distribution extending beyond the Himalaya. The **Spot-winged Tit** (11cm) is the first of three species of dark grey, crested tits. Two lines of fine spotting on the wings set this species apart from the larger **Rufous-naped Tit** (13cm) in which the black on the throat extends further down the breast and upper-belly compared to the **Rufous-vented Tit** (10cm, no photo), which is very similar but with a black throat sharply demarcated from the grey underparts. The **Black-throated Tit** (10cm) is a relatively long-tailed tit that will be most commonly remembered for its cartoon-like robber face-mask. Note also the reddish crown. Juveniles lack the black on the bib. The related **Rufous-fronted Tit** (10cm, no photo) of the C and E Himalaya is rufous below with a buff crown and whitish throat with a fine black line along the bib. The **Grey-crested Tit** (12cm) is cream-coloured with grey upperparts, a streaked face and a prominent crest.

2 Spot-winged Tits are confined to the NW and C Himalaya and occur in all types of forest from the foothills to the treeline.
3 Rufous-naped Tits inhabit a high belt of Himalayan forest and scrub up to 4000m.
4 Grey-crested Tits breed in high Himalayan forests.
5 Black-throated Tits live in the temperate forests of the Himalaya.

Green-backed Tits breed in the temperate zone of the Himalaya and winter down in the foothills.

The **Green-backed Tit** (13cm) is a common Himalayan bird. The pattern of its plumage follows the principles of that of the Great Tit but it is yellow on the flanks and green on the back. The **Black-lored Tit** (14cm) shares the features of yellow flanks and black centre of the belly but it displays a floppy crest and has black-streaked upperparts. The tiny **Yellow-browed Tit** (9cm) could almost be a leaf warbler (pp 149-151) but its rounded head and short black bill give it away as a tit. Olive-green on its upperparts, it has a faint short yellow eyebrow. Equally small, the **Fire-capped Tit** (9cm, no photo) is brighter green above and yellow below, and has a reddish crown in the male. The **Wallcreeper** (17cm) is a striking, unmistakable bird but unless it flies up it appears drab-coloured and is easily overlooked among the stones and boulders.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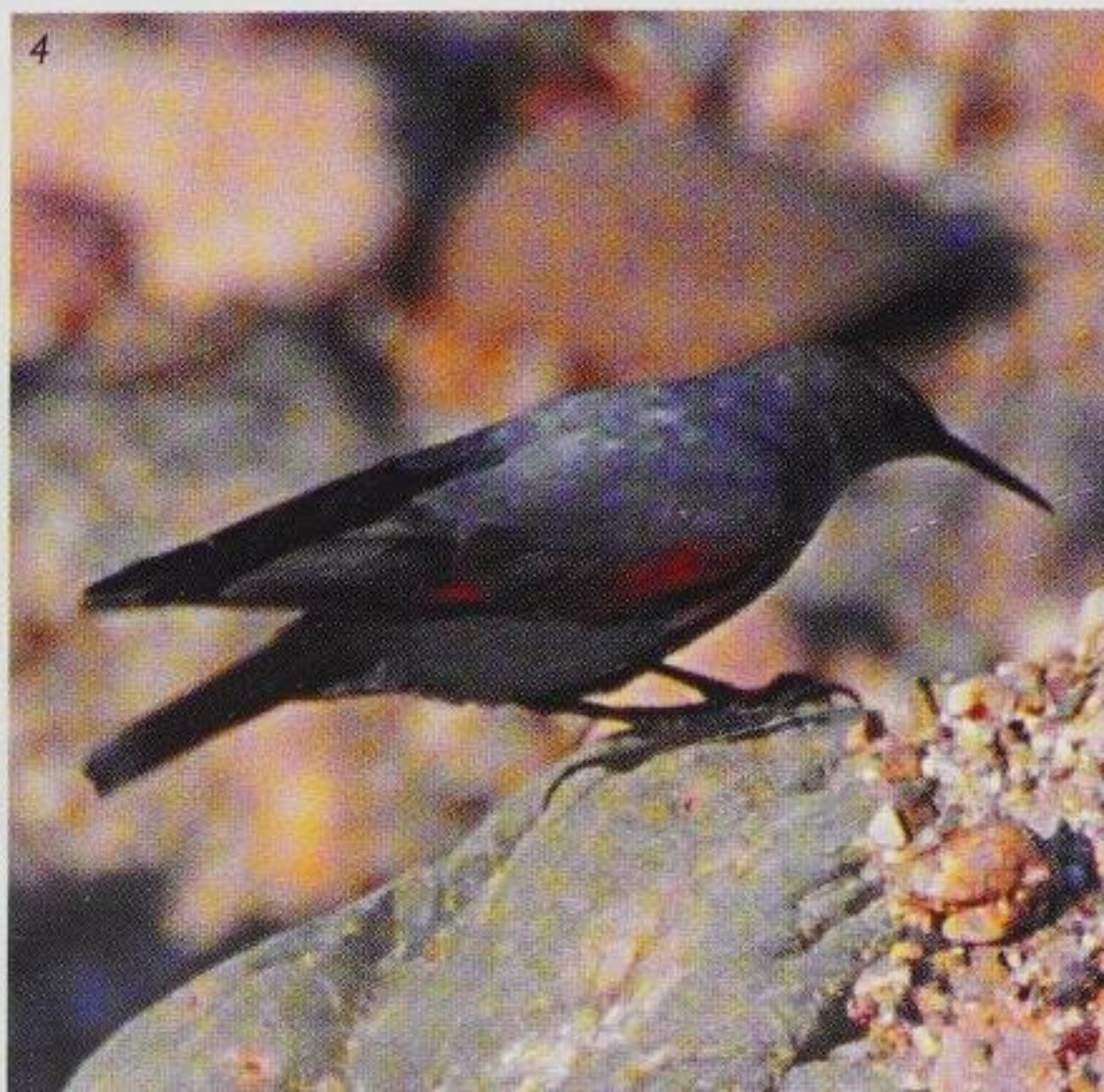
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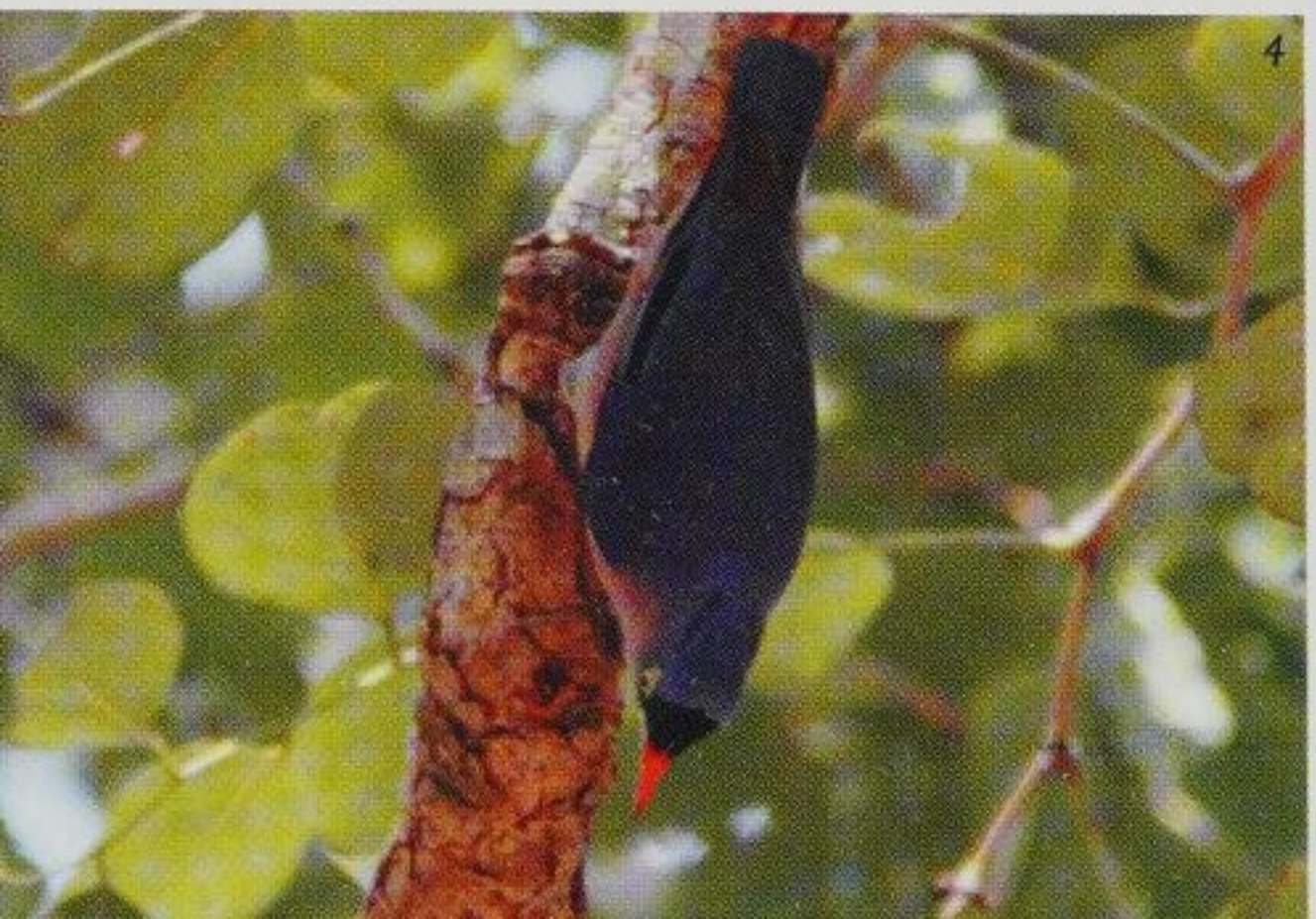
2 Black-lored Tits occur in the hill forests of W, C and E India as well as the Himalaya up to just over 2200m.
3 Yellow-browed Tits breed in Himalayan forest and winter down in the foothills.
4 Wallcreepers breed in the high Himalaya and winter in the foothills down to the plains.

Chestnut-bellied Nuthatches - here a female - are found in forests in C, E and the SW as well as the Himalaya to over 2500m.

Like other nuthatches, the **Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch** (12cm) can walk up and down trunks and branches. It has white cheeks sharply demarcated from the dark chestnut that extends from the centre of the throat down over the underparts. Females are lighter rufous-brown below, and very similar to the **White-tailed Nuthatch** (12cm). In this species, the white on the throat merges more gradually into the orange of the underparts. It has a repertoire of 'wit-wit' and 'pee-pee-pee' calls. The **White-cheeked Nuthatch** (12cm) is white on face and underparts with a dark crown. The call is a nasal, goat-like 'wheep'. The **Velvet-fronted Nuthatch** (10cm) is comically acrobatic in the way it flips sideways along horizontal branches, dangling and wing-flapping to prevent falling. The red bill and black forehead are diagnostic. The **Bar-tailed Treecreeper** (12cm) is the most familiar of several similarly plumaged treecreepers. It sings a loud trill. Similar but with an unbarred tail, the **Eurasian Treecreeper** (12cm, no photo) resides all along the Himalaya, and the **Rusty-flanked Treecreeper** (12cm, no photo) is seen in the C and E Himalaya.

2 White-tailed Nuthatches occur in the W Himalaya from 1600m to the treeline.
3 White-cheeked Nuthatches breed in the Himalaya and are seen from 2000m to the treeline.
4 Velvet-fronted Nuthatches breed in the lower C and E Himalaya and the W and E Ghats.
5 Bar-tailed Treecreepers are found in Himalayan forests up to the treeline.



Asian Paradise-flycatchers summer in W and E India and the lower Himalaya up to 2000m. Resident in the S.

Paradise-fly-catcher, shama, trogon

The **Asian Paradise-flycatcher** can count itself amongst some of India's most spectacular songbirds. Its streamers are several times longer than its body and the sight of males singing and chasing each other amidst the trees is unforgettable. Males come in rufous and white phases, while females are rufous. Asian Paradise-flycatchers inhabit a variety of wooded habitats. The **White-rumped Shama** (25cm) is the only chat with a long tail. The male is black with a red belly and a large white rump-patch; the female is duller. This is a bird that is often difficult to see in the thick vegetation of its tropical habitat, but its varied song readily gives it away. **Malabar Trogons** (31cm) are thickset birds with long tails. The male is bright red with a black head and narrow white breast-band. The female is overall orange-yellow. Both sexes show barring on the wings.

2 Female Asian Paradise-flycatcher.
3 White-rumped Shamas reside in the C and E Himalaya and W and E Ghats.
4 Malabar Trogons - here a male - are found in tropical forests in the W Ghats.

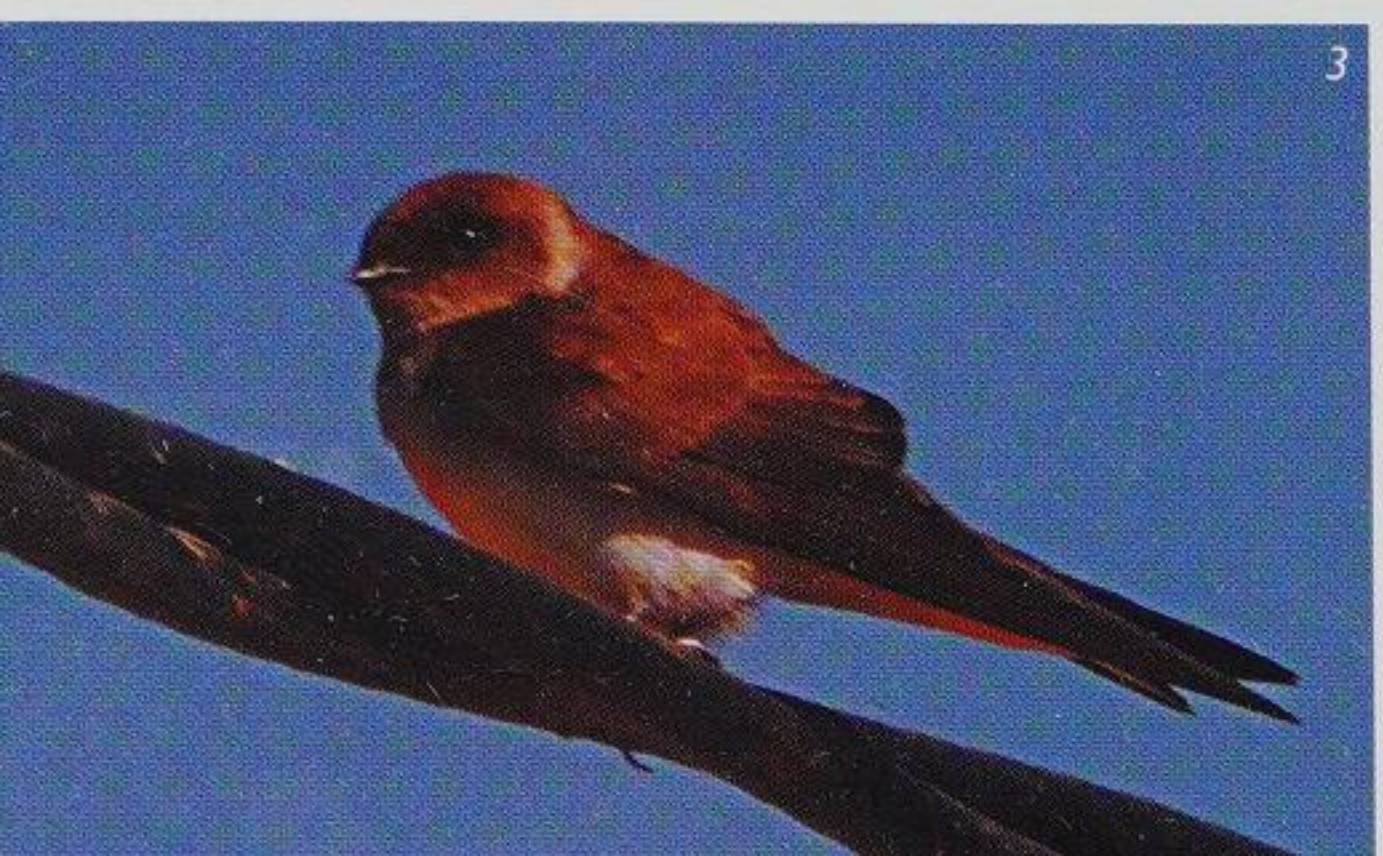
Swallows & martins

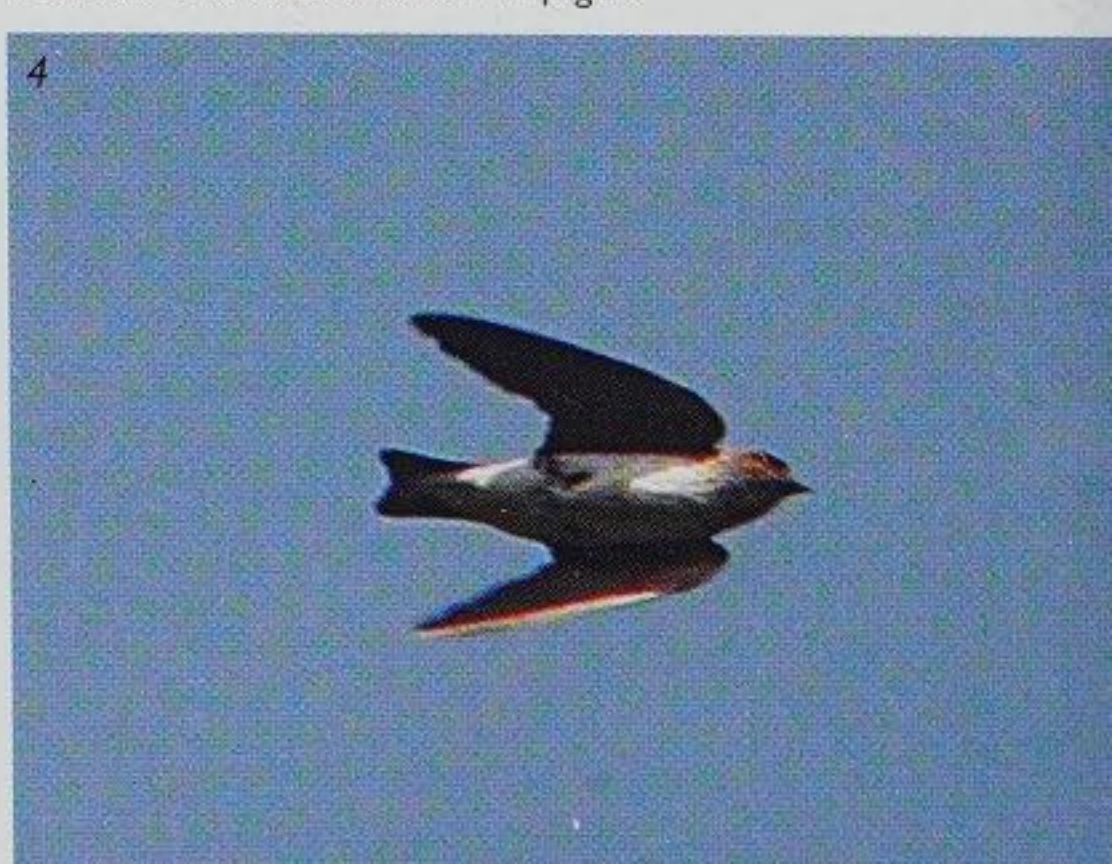
Red-rumped Swallows breed on cliffs and buildings throughout India up to the Himalaya.

Skilful on the wing, swallows and martins catch insects in flight, often while hawking over water. Some species build cup-sized nests out of clay while others breed in tunnels or holes in banks and cliffs.

The **Red-rumped Swallow** (20cm) is a relatively large swallow with a stiff, forked tail. The red on rump varies but the cheeks and face are always orange-red. Note the streaking on throat and upper breast. The much smaller **Streak-throated Swallow** (12cm) has distinctive black streaking on the face and throat. Also note the red crown and grey rump. Similar when seen in flight in the distance, **Plain Martins** (12cm) are sandy-brown with light breast and belly. The rarer **Sand Martin** (13cm, no photo) is lighter with a clear brown breast-band.

2 Streak-throated Swallows form large colonies under bridges in the W half of India.
3 Plain Martins commonly breed in tunnels in sand banks in N, W and C India.
4 Streak-throated Swallow in flight.





Barn Swallows breed in the Himalaya and winter throughout the subcontinent.

In India the **Barn Swallow** (18cm) is a common sight, breeding in hotels, shops and other buildings. The red throat and forehead, the narrow breast-band and the deeper fork in the tail separate it from Red-rumped. A tiny replica without breast-band and with a shorter tail, the **Pacific Swallow** (13cm, no photo) occurs in SW India and Sri Lanka. The **Wire-tailed Swallow** (14cm) is a handsome, compact swallow with bright blue-grey upperparts, a red crown and very long tail-wires. **Dusky Crag Martins** (13cm) are entirely dark brown. White markings on the shallow-forked tail distinguish them from Plain Martins. The similar **Eurasian Crag Martin** (14cm) differs in its lighter throat, belly and whitish flight feathers that contrast with dark underwing-coverts. **Asian House Martins** (15cm, no photo) are black above and off-white below with black cap, black wing-coverts and a white band above the black forked tail. Whiter below with white coverts is the **Northern House Martin** (15cm, no photo). They breed in the high NW Himalaya and are seen in the S in winter. If vent and throat are blackish you are looking at the **Nepal House Martin** (13cm, no photo) of the C and E Himalaya.

2

2 Wire-tailed Swallows are closely associated with water. They breed in Pakistan and India apart from the SE and NE.
3 Dusky Crag Martins breed in N, C, W and S India.
4 Eurasian Crag Martins breed in the Himalaya and winter in hills in peninsular India.

3

4

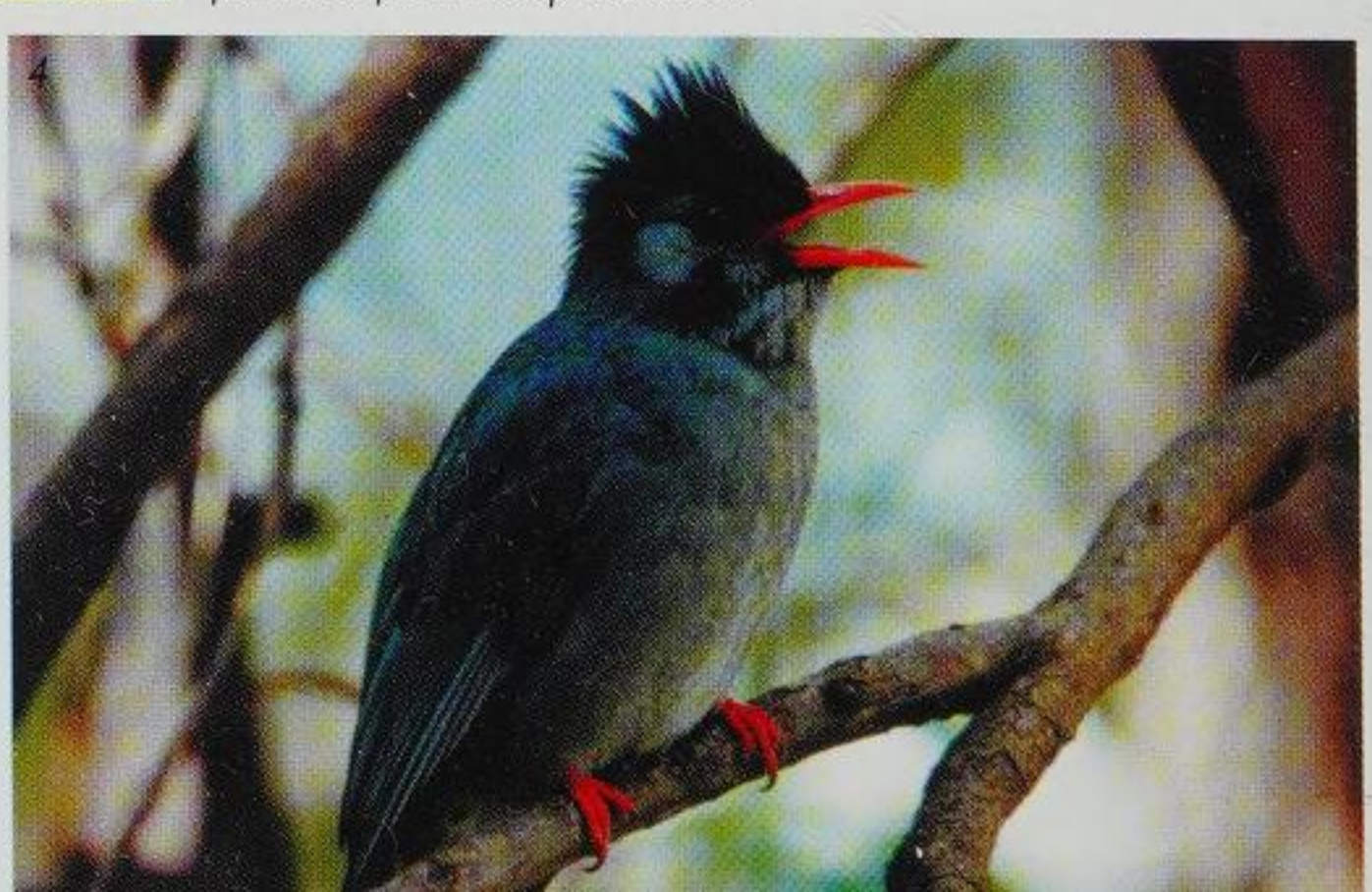
Bulbuls

Red-vented Bulbuls breed in all sorts of wooded and urban areas.

Cheerful birds of forests, gardens and undergrowth that feed on berries and fruits supplemented by insects and nectar. They often sit in an erect posture and the more familiar species are not very shy.

The **Red-vented Bulbul** (20cm) is a common garden bird with characteristic scaly-brown plumage, black-tufted head and red vent. It has cheerful calls. **Ashy Bulbuls** (20cm) combine green wings with a grey back. The head is dark with a brushy crest and white throat. **Black Bulbuls** (23cm) are dark grey with a black head that contrasts with the bright red feet and bill. A variety of chattering chuckles and a nasal 'wheee'. The race of the SW, sometimes considered a separate species, has less of a crest than the bird in the photo. **Moutain Bulbuls** (23cm) are green with warm-brown head and breast. The brushy-crested head is streaked with black.

2 Ashy Bulbuls are found in forest and forest edges in the C and E Himalaya up to 1600m.
3 Mountain Bulbuls occur in the C and E Himalaya to over 2500m.
4 Black Bulbuls are abundant in the Himalaya from the foothills up to3000m.

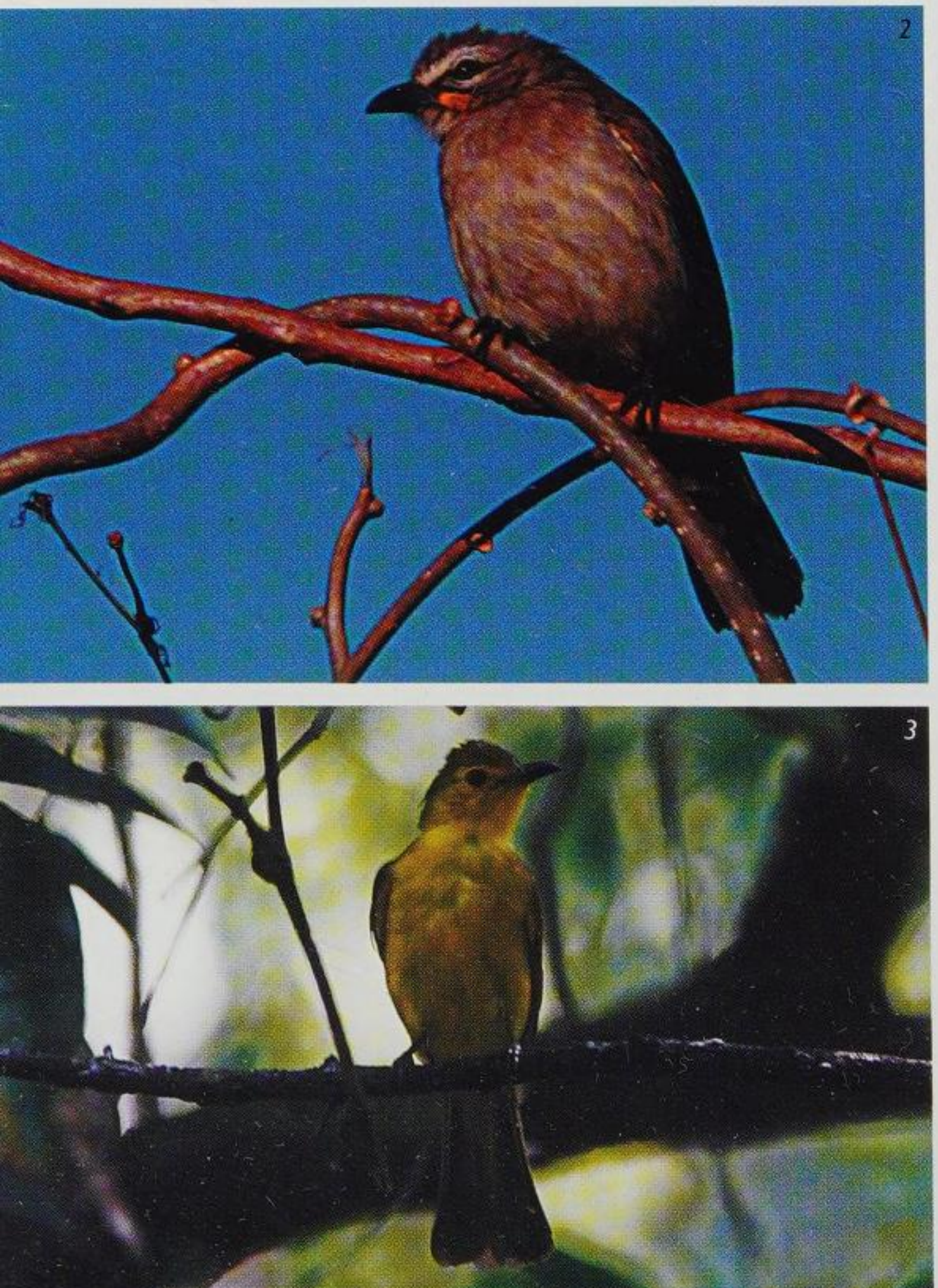


Himalayan Bulbuls inhabit all sorts of wooded areas in the Himalaya to over 2000m.

The **Himalayan Bulbul** (20cm) is very common around Himalayan hill stations. It is instantly recognisable by its curved crest, yellow vent and bold behaviour. The **White-eared Bulbul** (20cm) is near-identical but for lack of crest. **Black-crested Bulbuls** (19cm) are yellow with a greenish cast on the upperparts and a black head. The race restricted to the Himalaya has a crest, unlike the one in the photo. The **Grey-headed Bulbul** (19cm) often keeps its remarkable plumage concealed but it emits characteristic, bell-like calls from the dense scrub and trees it inhabits.

2 White-eared Bulbuls are found in dry thorn forest, gardens and cultivation in the plains of NW India and Pakistan.
3 Grey-headed Bulbuls are confined to the W Ghats.
4 Black-crested Bulbuls are birds of tropical forest and jungle in the C and E Himalaya, Orissa and the W Ghats.

Red-whiskered Bulbuls are found in parts of N, E and the Southern half of India apart from the SE.



The **Red-whiskered Bulbul** (20cm) is easily identified by its long crest, pristine white underparts and red vent. The **White-browed Bulbul** (20cm) is a much shyer bird but with a loud, rushed warble. It is buff below with yellow on its vent and dull green upperparts. Diagnostic is the white supercilium. The **Yellow-browed Bulbul** (20cm) often stays concealed in its evergreen habitat. It is oily yellow below and on the face, with olive-brown upperparts. **Striated Bulbuls** (20cm, no photo) are olive green, streaked with white. Note also the yellow throat and vent.

2 White-browed Bulbuls prefer thick bushes in open country and forest edges in the SW.
3 Yellow-browed Bulbuls breed in the W Ghats.

Plain Prinias are residents of cultivated fields and scrub in the entire subcontinent up to the foot of the Himalaya.

Prinias

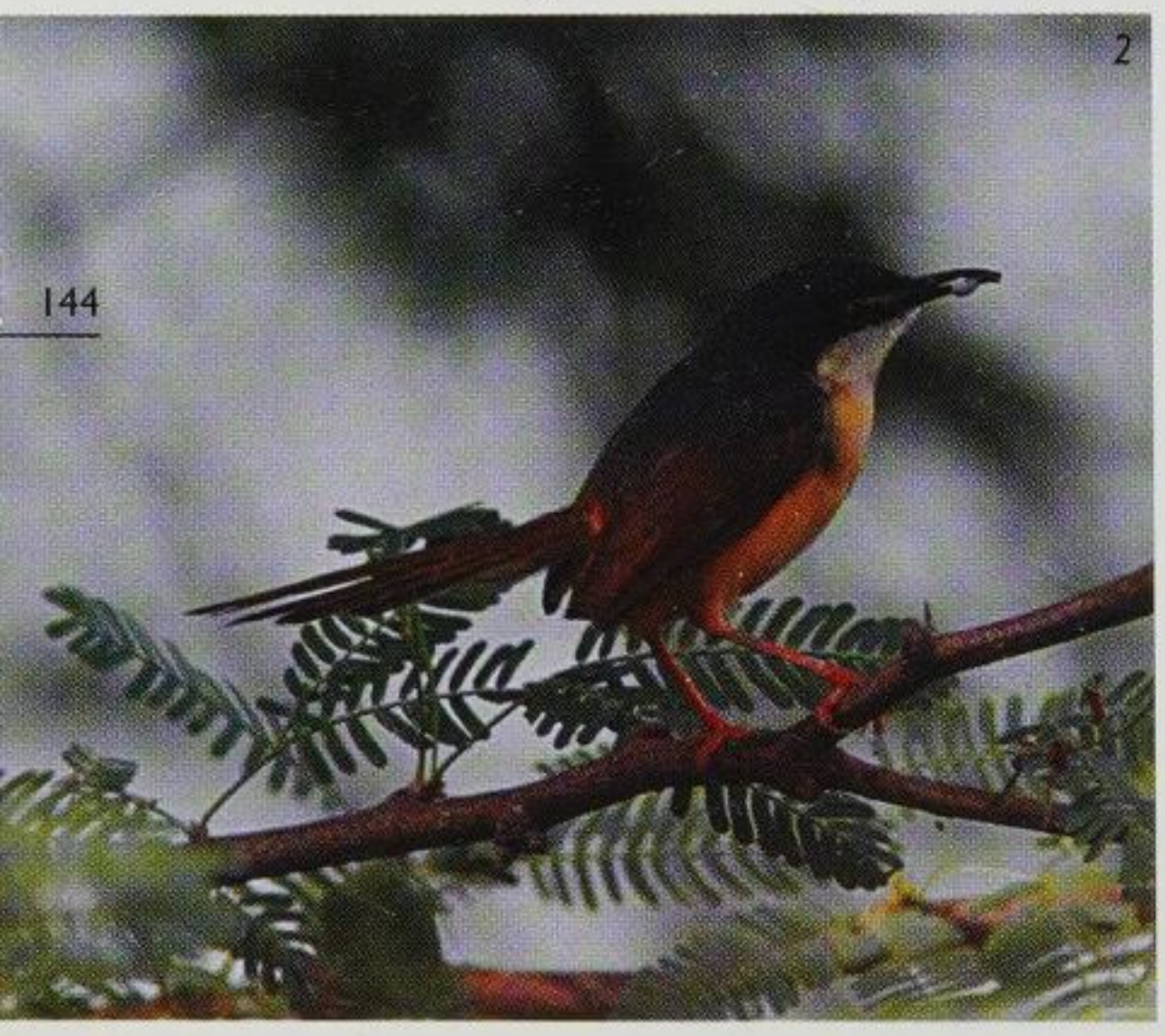
Prinias are small warblers with long, graduated tails and repetitive calls. Tailorbirds form a separate family but the only common species in India somewhat resembles the prinias.

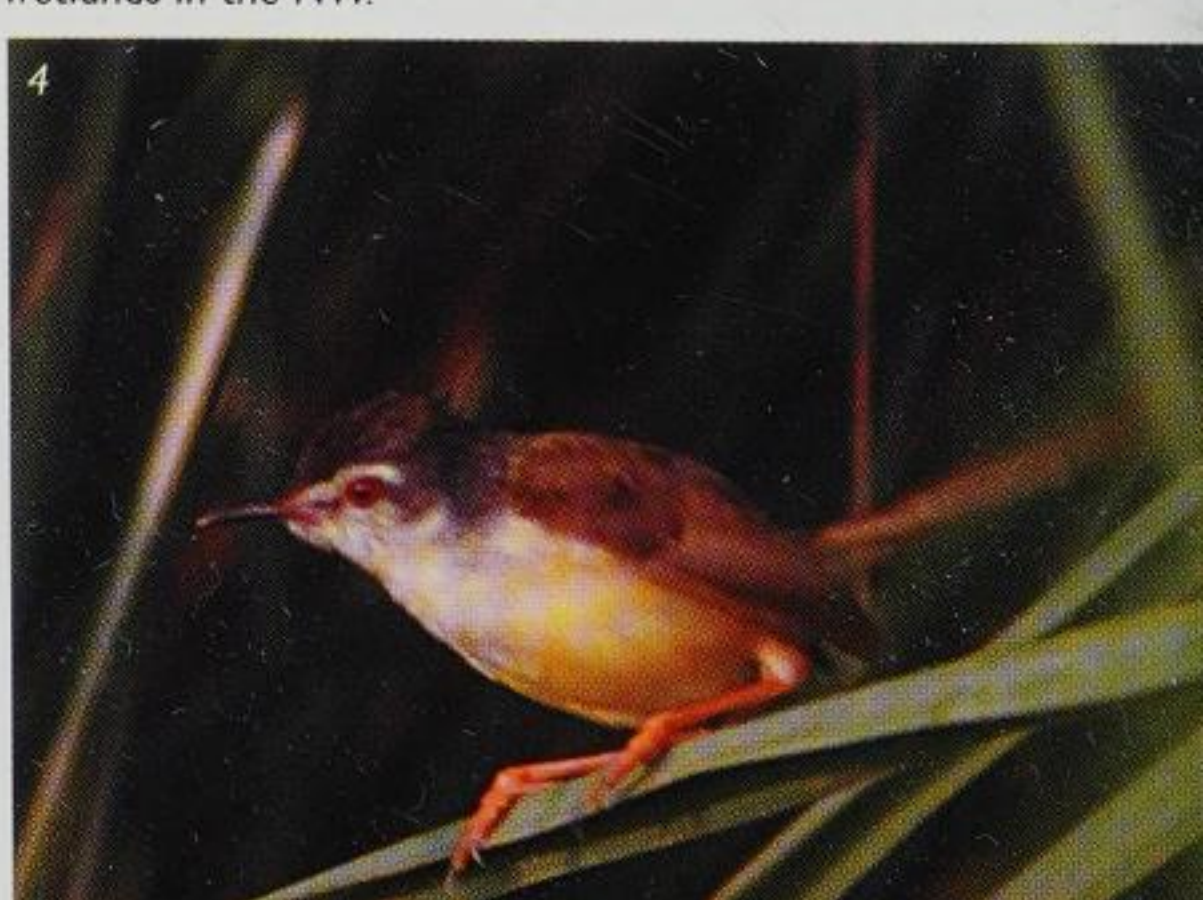
The **Plain Prinia** (13cm) is a rather nondescript but common bird of scrub, fields and farmland. It calls 'tlick-tlick-tlick' etc. and is smaller, with a longer supercilium, than the **Jungle Prinia** (15cm) which sings a repetition of tri-syllabic calls such as 'prit-pitee, prit-pitee' etc. These calls resemble the song of the **Striated Prinia** (16cm) but that species makes a repetitive bi-syllabic call. It is streaked on the back and mottled on the breast but this is often partly or entirely obscured when not breeding. Smaller and found in different habitat, the **Graceful Prinia** (13cm) is streaked from the crown down over the back.

2 Jungle Prinias of thicker bush jungle are widely distributed apart from the far SW, NE and NW.
3 Graceful Prinias reside in grassland and scrub in parts of the NW.
4 Striated Prinias inhabit bush-covered hillsides and forest edges in the Himalaya between 700 and 2500m.

Common Tailorbirds are residents over the entire subcontinent.

The **Common Tailorbird** (13cm) is a well known Indian bird. Its persistent 'chip-chip-chip-chip-chip' call is a familiar sound in gardens and parks in towns and cities. It is a finely built green-backed bird with a long tail that is frequently cocked. Note the black moustache in the breeding season. A nesting tailorbird ingeniously stitches together a folded leaf or leaves, creating a cocoon in which the nest is then placed. The **Ashy Prinia** (13cm) is a familiar bird. It is dark grey above and warm-buff below. It is noisy with a 'jimmy-jimmy-jimmy' call. **Yellow-bellied Prinias** (13cm) are unstreaked with a grey head and variable amounts of yellow on the underparts. They have a pleasant, descending song. **Grey-breasted Prinias** (11cm) are brown above with white underparts. In summer they develop grey on the crown and as a breast-band. These prinias emit a variety of high twittering calls.





2 Ashy Prinias reside in gardens and open forest throughout India.
3 Grey-breasted Prinias are numerous in various types of forest and wooded areas across the subcontinent.
4 Yellow-bellied Prinias are found in reedbeds in wetlands in the NW.

Warblers

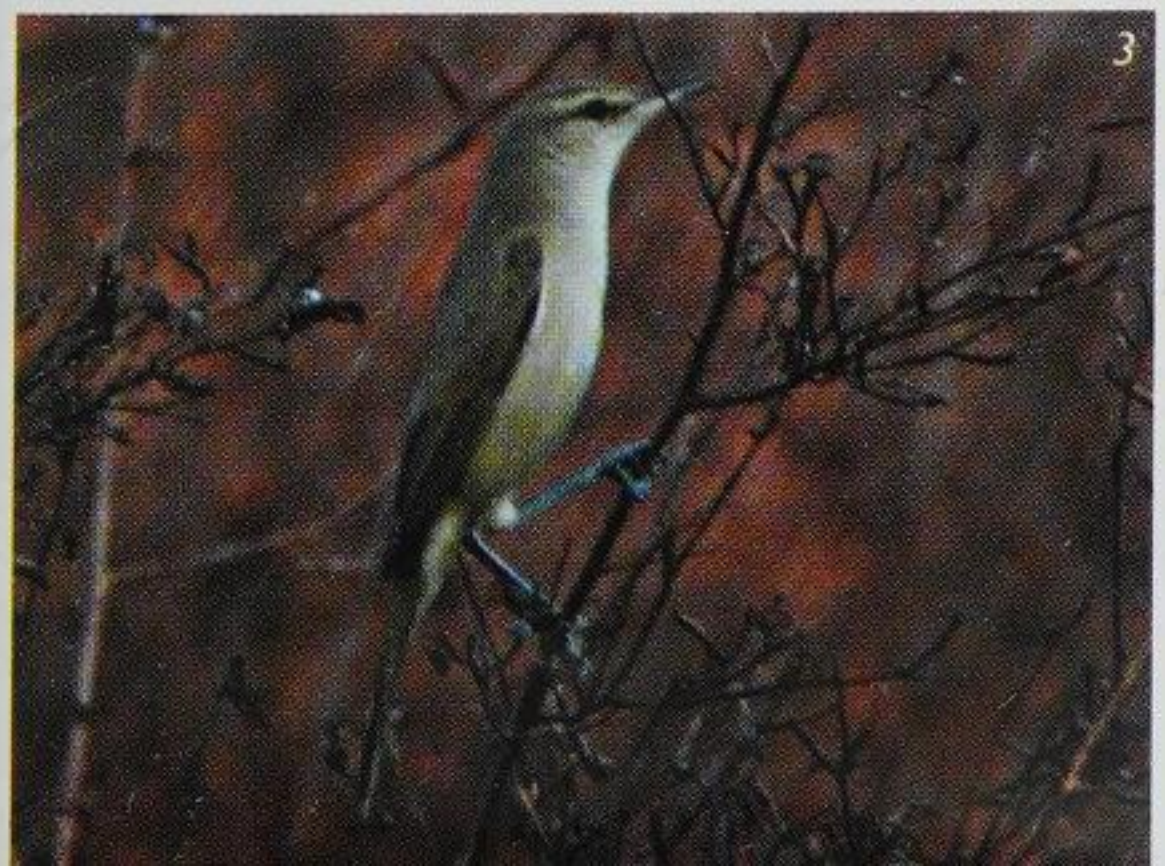
Blyth's Reed Warblers winter in scrub and undergrowth in the S and NE and are seen on migration throughout the N.

Warblers comprise a large group of small, drab-coloured species difficult to distinguish from each other. Their calls are important for identification but it takes time and experience to be able to put names to the birds.

The **Blyth's Reed Warbler** (14cm) is an olive-brown bird with light upperparts. Compared to bush warblers and Booted Warbler, the forehead looks very flat creating a typical reed warbler profile. The light supercilium is only clear in front of the eye and it is not dark bordered. This sets it apart from the similar but warmer buff-coloured **Paddyfield Warbler** (13cm) which has a broad, light supercilium that extends well behind the eye and is bordered with dark, giving the bird a stronger face pattern. Both species have rounded tails and emit 'chak' and 'chirrr' calls; that of Blyth's Reed is harsher. The **Booted Warbler** (12cm) is superficially similar but when observed closely shows a more rounded head and shorter bill. Its call is a 'tak', softer than Blyth's Reed Warbler. The **Clamorous Reed Warbler** (19cm) is like a huge Blyth's Reed Warbler. Note the loud squeaky and churring calls and song.

2

2 Paddyfield Warblers winter in the W and SW in marsh vegetation.
3 Clamorous Reed Warblers winter in marsh vegetation and trees near water in parts of W, C and SW India.
4 Booted Warblers breed in the dry hills of Pakistan and winter in parts of W and S India, in scrub, crops and scattered trees.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Zitting Cisticolas are resident in wet grassland and reedbeds through most of the subcontinent.

The **Zitting Cisticola** (10cm) is a tiny bird somewhat similar to prinias (pp143-144). It has a characteristic song flight during which it calls a 'click-click-click' etc. Note small size, streaked crown and back, and white tips to the tail feathers. The **Moustached Warbler** (13cm) is warm-brown above with dark streaks and a strong face pattern of black striped crown, broad white supercilium, and dark cheeks plus eye-line. Call: 'trek'. Rare wintering **Grasshopper Warblers** (13cm, no photo) are streaked on crown and upperparts, and on the rounded tails. The **Lesser Whitethroat** (12cm) is different from all other warblers on this page with its grey crown and dark grey cheeks but note the almost identical **Hume's Lesser Whitethroat** (14cm, no photo), which has the grey extending to the back. The **Desert Warbler** (11cm) is light sandy-brown with a reddish tail. Characteristic are the yellow iris and white eye-ring.

2 Moustached Warblers winter in swamps in Pakistan and parts of NW India.
3 Lesser Whitethroats winter over much of India apart from much of the E and far S.
4 Desert Warblers winter in Pakistan and the far NW of India.

Striated Grassbirds are residents of marshes in parts of the N plains.

The **Striated Grassbird** (25cm) is a huge warbler with a long, graduated tail and broad black streaking on the back. It has a loud, varied song and calls. The first of two Himalayan bush warblers, the **Brownish-flanked Bush Warbler** (11cm) is very nondescript and skulky. It will be found and identified by its characteristic song, a pleasant 'seeeeeeeeee-cheewiechu'. **Grey-sided Bush Warblers** (10cm) are warm red-brown with grey sides to the white throat and underparts. The undertail-coverts are a rich chestnut-brown. It calls a high 'chik' and sings a rushed warble, followed by two drawn-out, wheezy notes.

2 Brownish-flanked Bush Warblers reside in the Himalaya up to 3000m.
3 Grey-sided Bush Warblers breed around the treeline and winter down in the foothills.
4 Greenish Warbler (see p150).

Grey-hooded Warblers are abundant from the foothills to over 2500m in the Himalaya.

The **Grey-hooded Warbler** (10cm) is a noisy and restless warbler constantly uttering variations of its 'tsi-chewe' call. It is yellow with green upperparts and a grey head and back with a white supercilium bordered by dark lines. Note also the white sides to its tail. The **Whistler's Warbler** (10cm) has a yellow eye-ring and a black line along the side of the crown. It is green on the upperparts including the face and its call is a pleasant 'jewe'. The **Goldcrest** (8cm) is one of India's tiniest birds. Note the black-and-yellow crown and the dark wings with broad, white bars. The **Chestnut-headed Tesia** (8cm) is a skulky little tailless warbler, more easily heard than seen. It takes some practice to tell its 'dzit' call apart from the 'chik' of the similarly shy Scaly-breasted Wren Babbler (see p 158).

2

3

2 Whistler's Warblers breed up to the treeline and winter in the Himalayan foothills.
3 Goldcrests summer up to the Himalayan treeline and winter down to 800m.
4 Chestnut-headed Tesias have a similar distribution, but not reaching right up to the treeline.

4

Leaf Warblers

Common Chiffchaffs winter in scrub and around fields in the N half of the subcontinent.

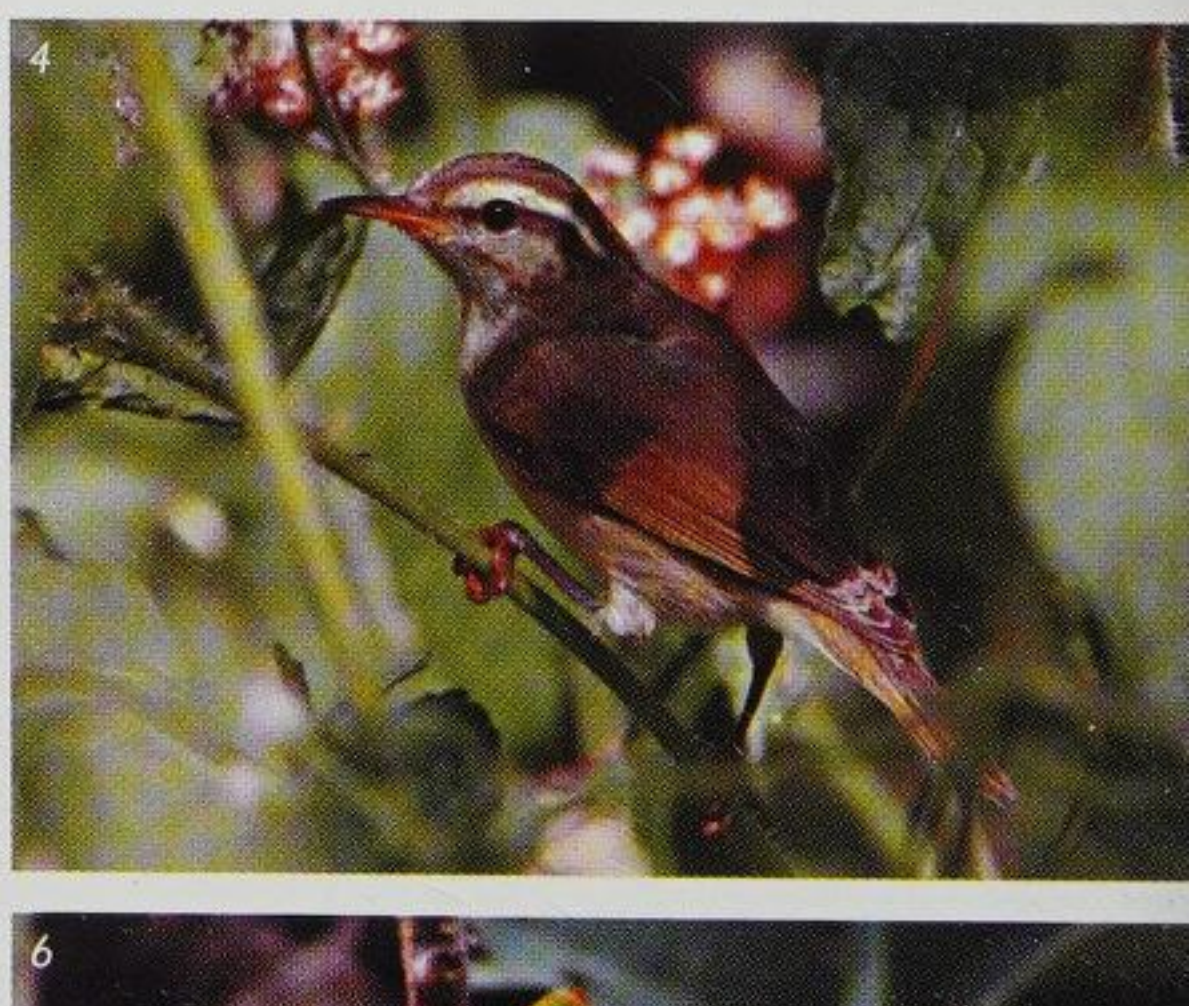
With the Leaf Warblers we come to one of the most difficult and sometimes frustrating groups of birds in India. Various species are extremely similar and it can take years to feel confident in identifying them. For identification, occurrence and strength of light supercilium, wing-bars, rump-patch and crown-stripes are important, as are darkness on crown, white in tail, colour and size of bill, the call and finally the colour shades of the under- and upperparts.

Common Chiffchaffs (10cm) have few obvious markings apart from a not very long, light supercilium and a dark line through the eye. The upperparts are brown to olive-brown and the legs and short bill are dark. The call is a 'peooo'. **Mountain Chiffchaffs** (10cm) winter in Pakistan and summer in Ladakh. Very difficult to distinguish from Common Chiffchaff but note di-syllabic call and different distribution. **Dusky Warblers** (10cm, no photo) that winter along the C Himalaya and in the E are like chiffchaffs but are greyer above and have light legs. They are also more skulky and emit 'tak' or 'chek' calls. The **Smoky Warbler** (10cm) is dark grey above and light yellow-grey below, with a yellowish supercilium and a dark eye-line. Like the other leaf warblers on this page, **Tytler's Leaf Warbler** (10cm) has no wing-bars. It looks like a chiffchaff but is more olive-green above, or like a Greenish Warbler without wing-bars. Note the long, slender bill that is hooked at the tip.

2 Mountain Chiffchaffs breed in Trans-Himalayan Ladakh.
3 Smoky Warblers summer above the treeline in the C Himalaya and winter in the foothills of the E Himalaya, mainly in undergrowth often near water.
4 Tytler's Leaf Warblers breed in Kashmir, migrate through the W Himalaya and in winter in the W Ghats.

The **Sulphur-bellied Warbler** (10cm) is brown above and oily-yellow below. It calls a quiet 'pic' and is the only leaf warbler that constantly creeps over rocks and boulders. The similar **Tickell's Leaf Warbler** (10cm) never does that and is brighter lemon-yellow below and on the supercilium, which is also more orange before the eye than the Sulphur-bellied. The call is a harsher 'chip'. Note also the 'trrrk' call. While the previous species are without wing-bars, all following species do have wing-bars, though in the **Greenish Warbler** (11cm) these can be absent due to wear of the feathers. In good light this warbler is distinctly green with a very long light supercilium. The brightest race is now considered a separate species called **Green Warbler** (11cm). Both species have light bills and normally show one thin wing-bar and sometimes a shorter, second. Their calls are 'tissweet' and 'tisseeweet' respectively, and the song is a rushed, irregular sequence of squeaky notes. Larger but similar is the **Large-billed Leaf Warbler** (12cm) which has a darker bill and a crown which is darker than the mantle. The call is a diagnostic 'dir-tee' and the song is an instantly recognisable, descending 'ti-titi-tutu'. **Hume's Warbler** (10cm) looks more compact and is browner above, with one short but broad light wing-bar. Note also the dark bill. The call is a brisk 'chewit' and the song is a very high, long-drawn-out, descending 'tseeeeuuuu'.

1 Sulphur-bellied Warblers breed on stony slopes with scrub and scattered trees in the high NW Himalaya, moving via NW to C India for the winter.
2 Tickell's Leaf Warblers breed in similar habitats along the high Himalaya and winter in the terai and SW India.
3 Greenish Warblers winter throughout the subcontinent.
4 Green Warblers winter in far S India and Sri Lanka.
5 Large-billed Leaf Warblers breed in the Himalaya in wooded areas near streams and winter in the plains.
6 Hume's Warblers summer in the high Himalayan forests and winter from the foothills down through the N plains to C.



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Western Crowned Warblers (10cm) are cold-green above and silvery grey below. They have two light wing-bars, one always visible. The crown is dark green with a yellow stripe over the middle. The supercilium is yellowish, bordered by a dark line through the eye. The bill is conspicuously orange. The calls are 'chip-wee' and 'stit-chewe-chewe-chew' etc. The very similar **Blyth's Leaf Warbler** (9cm) is brighter green above and yellower below. The sequence of notes that forms its song is less regular than that of the Western Crowned. Compact, brightly coloured and with clearly double wing-bars plus a yellow rump is the **Lemon-rumped Warbler** (9cm). It also has a yellow supercilium, and a dark crown with a yellowish crown-stripe in the middle. The call is a high 'tseep'. The **Buff-barred Warbler** (10cm) is similar but note the orangey wing-bars and white sides to the tail. Call: a high 'tit', often combined into a rushed trill. The **Ashy-throated Warbler** (9cm) shows the same combination of yellowish wing-bars, rump, supercilium and crown-stripe but is distinguished by its grey head and throat. Its call is a 'tsit'.

1 Western Crowned Warblers breed high up in the NW Himalaya and winter in S India.
2 Blyth's Leaf Warblers summer in the high Himalaya and winter in the C and E foothills.
3 Lemon-rumped Warblers winter in the Himalayan foothills but move up into the higher mountains to breed.
4 Lemon-rumped Warbler.
5 Buff-barred Warblers breed up to the treeline in the Himalaya and winter down to 1500m.
6 Ashy-throated Warblers nest in forests up to 3500m in the Himalaya and move lower in winter but not below 1500m.

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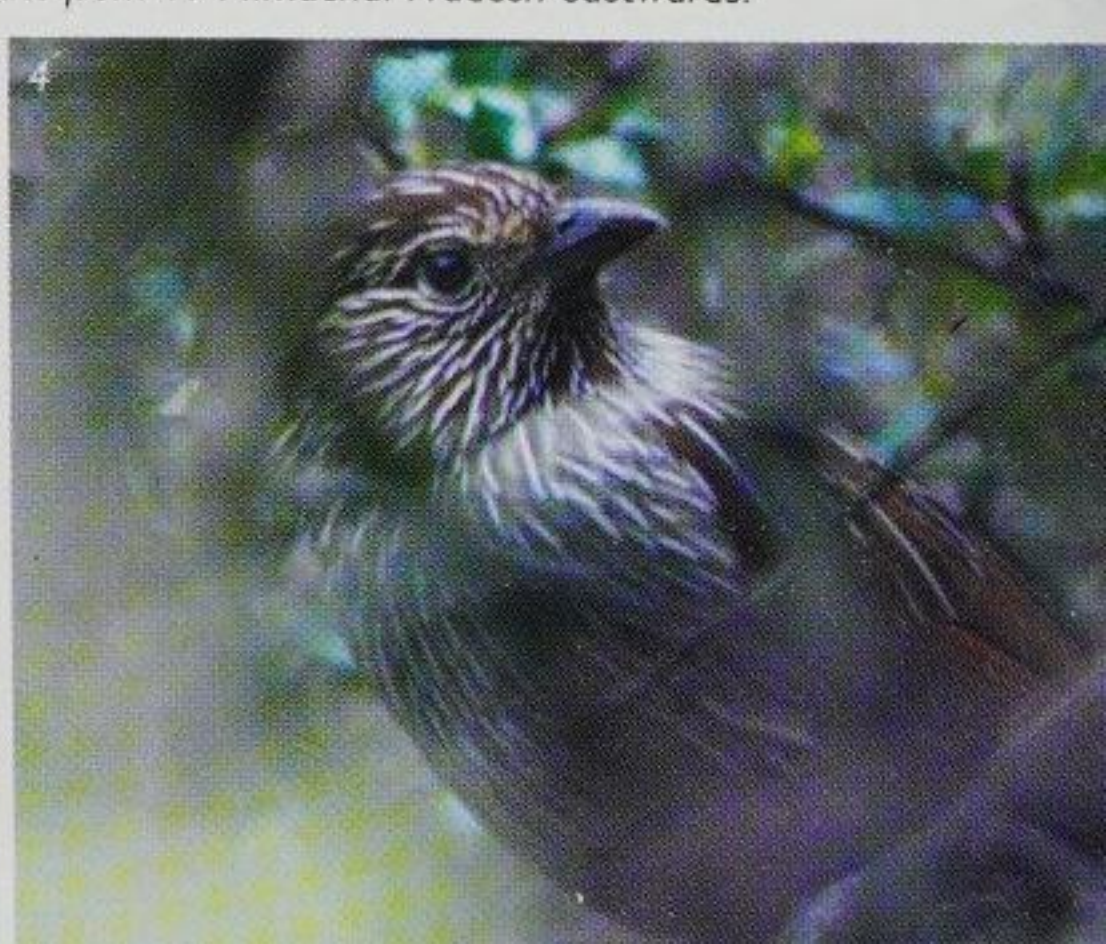
Laughingthrushes

Streaked Laughingthrushes breed from 1500m to about 3000m on bush-covered hillsides and forest edges in the Himalaya.

Laughingthrushes are social birds of the undergrowth. Most species are fairly shy but move around in noisy troupes while feeding and will fly short distances between bushes revealing their short, rounded wings.

The **Streaked Laughingthrush** (20cm) is an exception to the rule that laughingthrushes are rather difficult to observe. This species will sit next to a bush as easily as it moves around inside it, calling its high rolling and twittering calls. It looks superficially similar to the equally noisy but much larger **Striated Laughingthrush** (28cm) that is greyer brown with a brushy crest. **Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrushes** (28cm) have prominent scaling on the back and sides of the breast. Important to note are the blackish chin, chestnut crown, and in the western race, the greenish wing-panel. Superficially similar, the **Rufous-chinned Laughingthrush** (22cm, no photo) of the C and E Himalaya has black on the crown and moustache and rufous on the chin and undertail. The upperparts are brownish with black dots and wing-bars. The **Rufous-necked Laughingthrush** (23cm) is unmistakable.

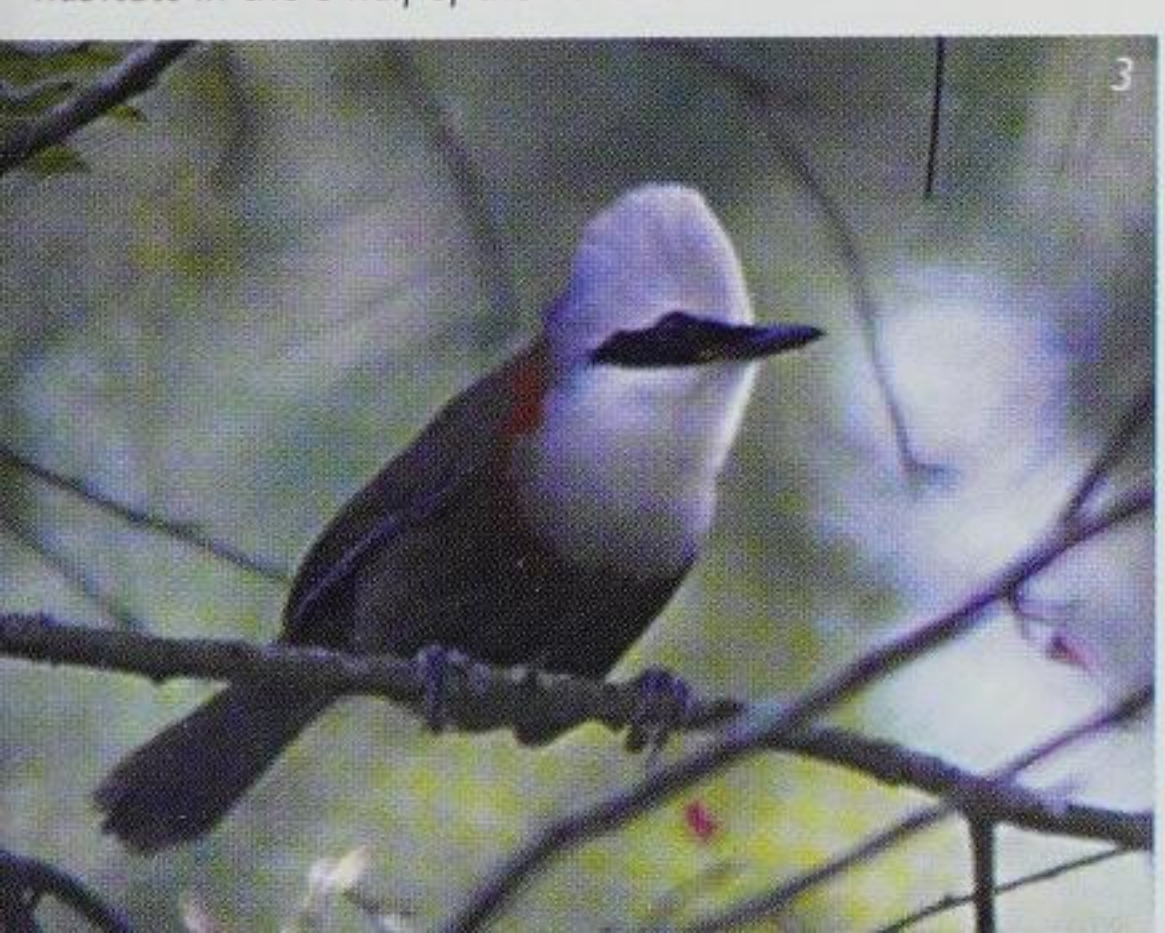
2 Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrushes breed up to the treeline and winter down to the lowest foothills of the Himalaya.
3 Rufous-necked Laughingthrushes are seen in scrub and undergrowth below 1500m in the foothills of the E Himalaya.
4 Striated Laughingthrushes occur at similar heights in better-forested habitats from W Himachal Pradesh eastwards.



Variegated Laughingthrushes reside in the C and W Himalaya up to the treeline in summer and down to 1000m in winter.

The **Variegated Laughingthrush** (24cm) is a light-coloured bird with black on the chin and around the eye. The wings show areas with black, cream and yellow. The undertail is red-brown. Its repertoire includes a pleasant, tri-syllabic call. **White-throated Laughingthrushes** (28cm) are plain-brown with rufous-brown under-bellies and conspicuous white throats. This species is fairly confiding, openly moving around in wooded areas in large troupes. The shyer but distinctive **White-crested Laughingthrush** (28cm) is adorned with a large, rounded crest. It has its own repertoire of chuckles and loud laughter. In the C and E Himalaya, two species of laughingthrush occur that look like the White-throated but which have black breast-bands, broad and lower down the breast in case of the **Greater Necklaced Laughingthrush** (29cm, no photo) or narrower and higher on the breast and lined with rufous above and white below the necklace in the case of the **Lesser Necklaced Laughingthrush** (27cm, no photo). The **Grey-breasted Laughingthrush** (20cm) of the W Ghats has a rufous belly and grey breast. Note the white supercilium and a broad black band through the eye as well as (in one race) a black chin. One race has a white breast, lightly streaked with grey-brown. The **Nilgiri Laughingthrush** (20cm, no photo) is similar but the rufous on the belly extends all the way to the upper chest and cheeks.

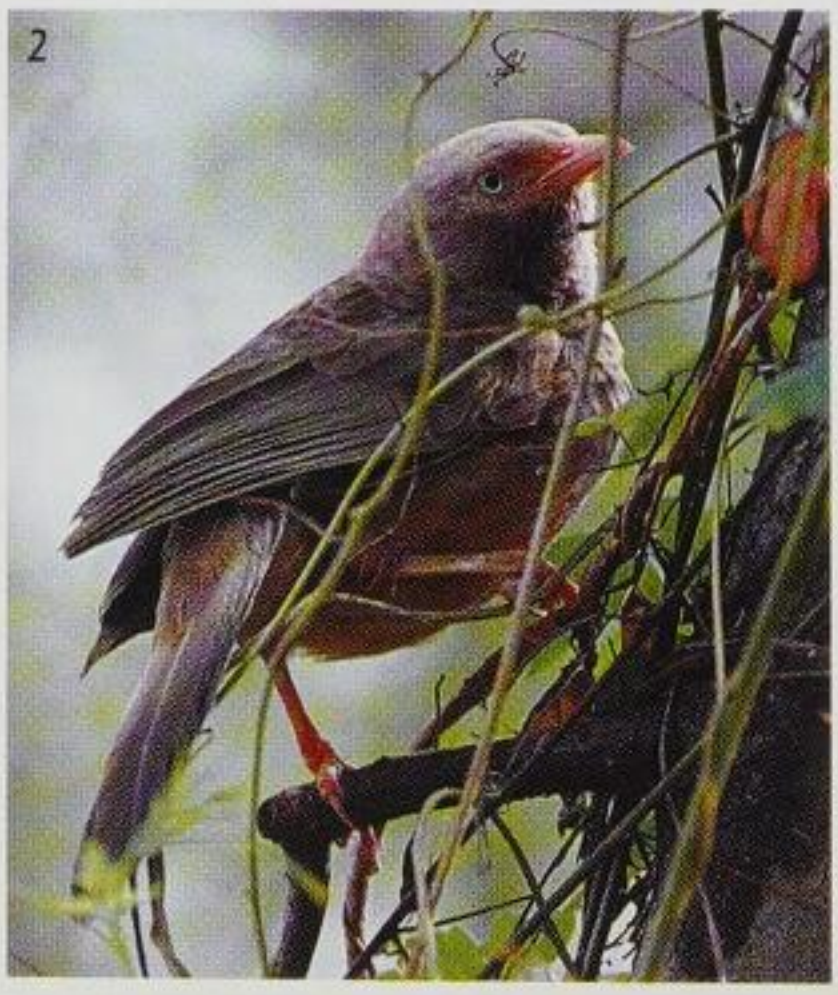
2 White-throated Laughingthrushes, also confined to the Himalaya, summer up to the treeline and winter down to 1000m.
3 White-crested Laughtingthrushes breed and winter in the lush forest of the foothills to close to 2000m.
4 Grey-breasted Laughingthrushes occur in very limited shola and garden habitats in the S half of the W Ghats.



Babblers

A very diverse group of birds that feed on insects, seeds and fruit. Many species are gregarious and noisy and have short wings and strong legs.

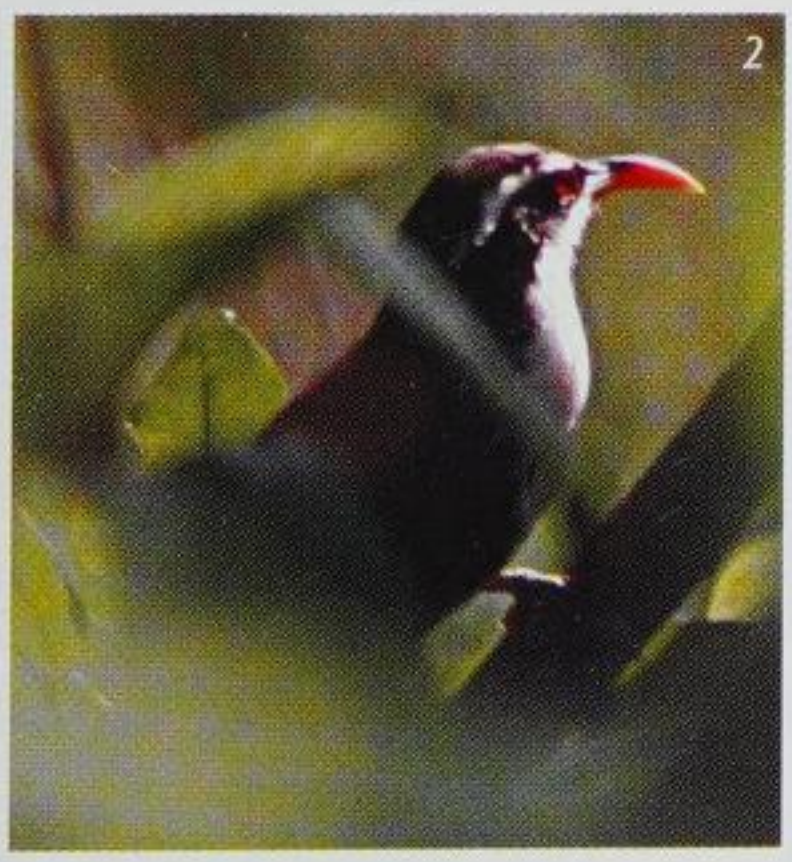
The **Jungle Babbler** (25cm) is the first of several species of grey-brown babblers with fairly strong bills and long, graduated tails. This species is grey, the southern race having a rufous wash. The species doesn't have any streaking but the plumage appears somewhat mottled. Troupes communicate in scolding and chattering calls. The **Common Babbler** (22cm) has dark streaking on the crown and back. It has high-pitched calls and a 'bi-bi-bi-bi-bi' song. The **Large Grey Babbler** (28cm) looks like a large Jungle Babbler but it has diagnostic white sides to its tail and black lores. It has a nasal, whining call. In the S the **Yellow-billed Babbler** (23cm) is common. It is distinguished from the Jungle Babbler by the strong dark mottling on the throat and breast, some streaking on the upperparts and a broad yellow eye-ring. Also the streaking on the crown is less distinct. The **Rufous Babbler** (25cm, no photo) is unmistakably deep red-brown below and dark brown above, with a yellow bill. The **Striated Babbler** (25cm) resembles the Common Babbler but is larger and the absence of a white throat is important.

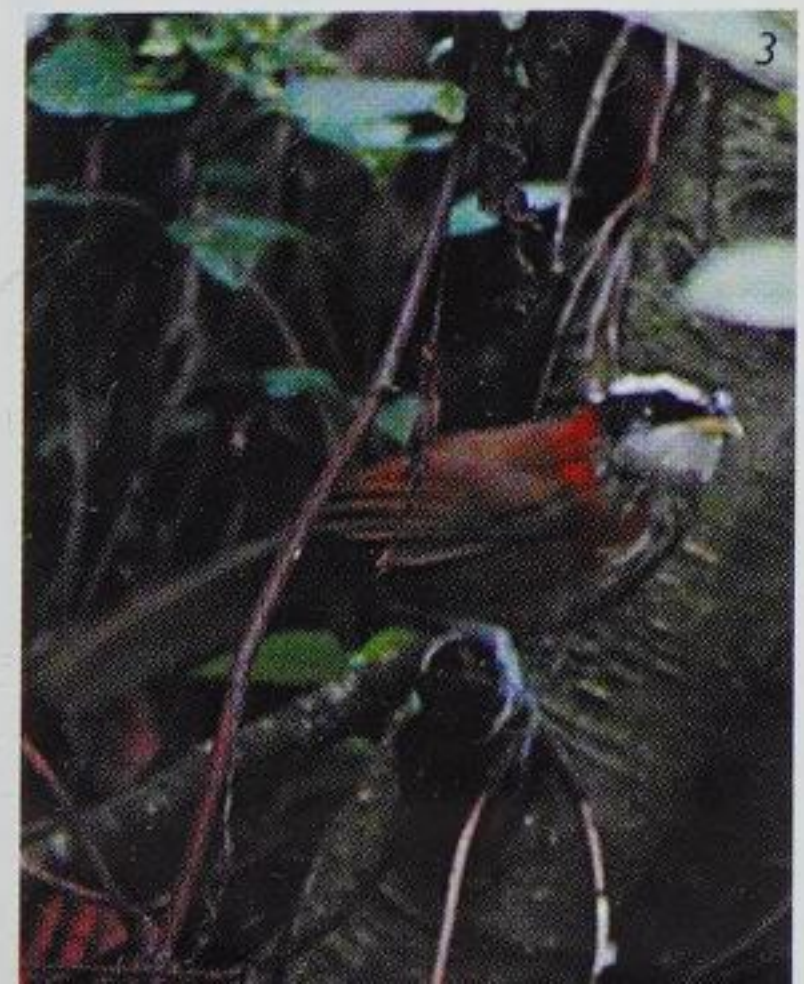


1 Jungle Babblers are common in all types of wooded country over most of the subcontinent.
2 Yellow-billed Babblers are resident in open wooded country and scrub in S India.
3 Common Babblers inhabit hedges and scrub throughout the subcontinent apart from the E.
4 Large Grey Babblers are resident in drier habitats in India apart from the E and far S.
5 Striated Babblers inhabit marshes in N India and Pakistan.

Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babblers inhabit thick undergrowth in wooded areas in the Himalaya from the low foothills to 2200m.

The **Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler** (25cm) is red-brown on the cheeks, the sides of the underparts and belly. It has a light, down-curved bill. Pairs call in duet, the song merging into a 'cheewoo-keek'. **Indian Scimitar Babblers** (22cm) are dark brown with white throat and breast, a long white supercilium and a yellow, down-curved bill. The male calls 'woop-pu-pu'. The **White-browed Scimitar Babbler** (22cm, no photo) is very similar, and because of its shyness all one often sees is the head with the conspicuous white supercilium and yellow, scimitar-like bill. Note that it is much lighter above than the previous species and that it is red-brown instead of black-brown on the sides of the upper breast. Call: an accelerating 'woot-woot-woot' etc. The very similar **Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler** (19cm) differs in that it has a shorter bill and brown streaking on the breast. The **Yellow-eyed Babbler** (18cm) is a warm-brown, long-tailed bird with white underparts and a conspicuous yellow iris with a red eye-ring. It has various high calls such as 'cheep, cheep' and 'twew-twew'.





2 Indian Scimitar Babblers breed in undergrowth in the regions of S India.
3 Streak-breasted Scimitar Babblers reside in the C and E Himalaya.
4 Yellow-eyed Babblers occur over much of the subcontinent in thick grass, hedges etc. and near fields.

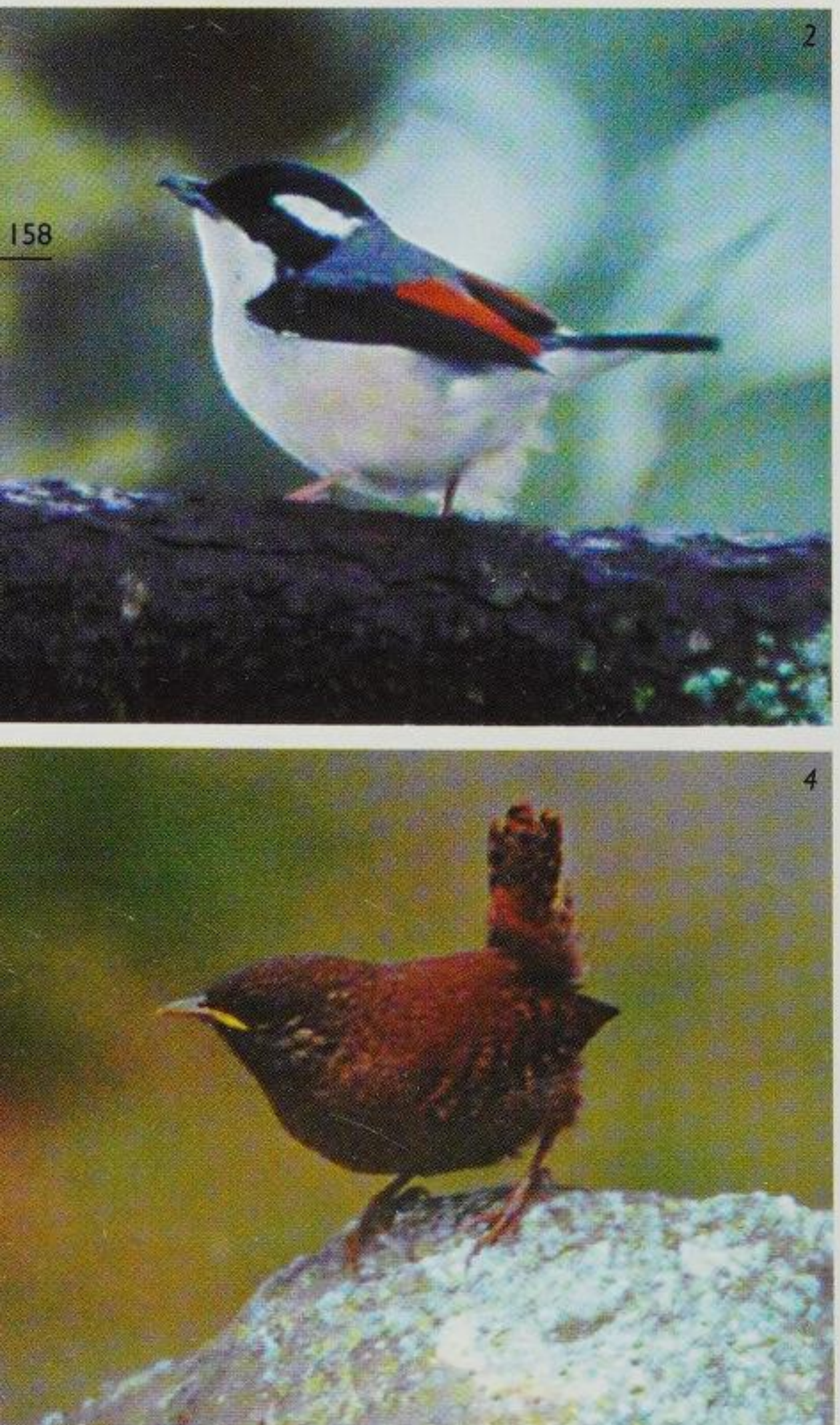
The **Puff-throated Babbler** (16cm) has a surprisingly musical song for a bird that otherwise has an unobtrusive lifestyle. **Tawny-bellied Babblers** (13cm) are small birds with bright tawny underparts and reddish fore-crown; one race has a white throat. **Dark-fronted Babblers** (13cm) look conspicuous with their black cap, yellow iris, chocolate-brown mantle and pure-white underparts. The **Whiskered Yuhina** (13cm), like other yuhinas, has a rounded crest. Note the rufous neck collar and the black below the eye. The C and E Himalaya are home to more yuhinas such as the **Black-chinned Yuhina** (11cm, no photo) with grey head, black moustache and black-streaked crest; the **Stripe-throated Yuhina** (12cm, photo p 157) with black and orange in the wings and brown stripes on the whitish throat; and the **Rufous-vented Yuhina** (13cm, no photo) with salmon-to-rufous underparts, orange nape and grey neck. **Grey-throated Babblers** (12cm) have large eyes that are accentuated by black-and-white stripes on the crown and chin.

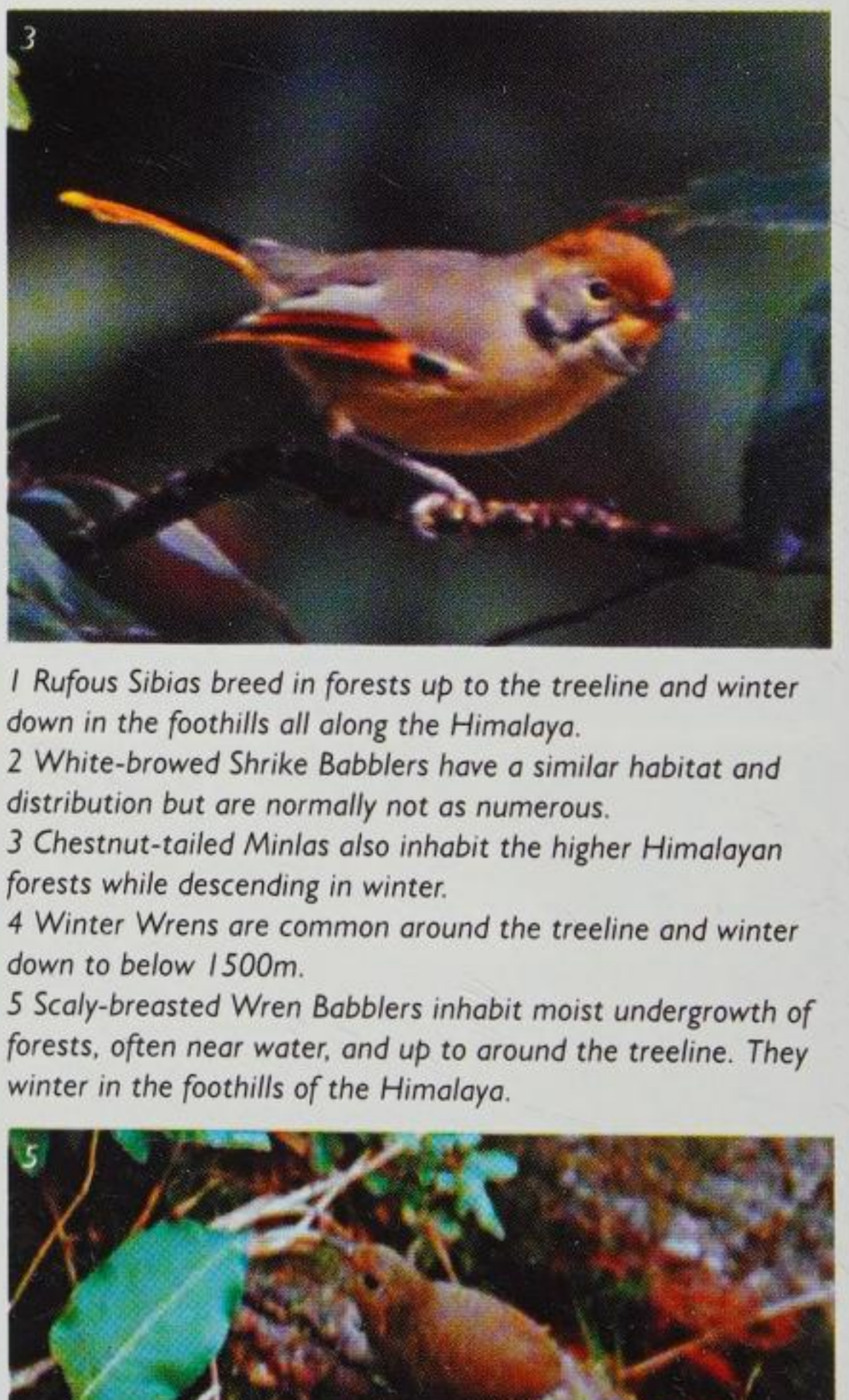
1 Puff-throated Babblers occur in various types of forest in the foothills of the Himalaya and parts of W, S, C and E India.
2 Tawny-bellied Babblers reside in wooded habitat in the W Ghats.
3 Whiskered Yuhinas breed in Himalayan forests up to 3000m, descending in winter.
4 Dark-fronted Babblers are also found in dense W Ghats habitats.
5 Grey-throated Babblers occur in low Himalayan forest, from C Nepal eastwards.

1 Brown-cheeked Fulvettas are resident in wooded country in C and S India.
2 Nepal Fulvettas occur in the C and E Himalaya up to 2000m.
3 Stripe-throated Yuhinas (p 156) breed in forests in the C and E. Himalaya.
4 Red-billed Leiothrixes are resident in Himalayan forest undergrowth to over 2000m.
5 Black-chinned Babblers breed in the Himalaya from the foothills to about 2000m.

The **Black-chinned Babbler** (10cm) is brown with a slightly brighter coloured crown. The black on the chin and in front of the eye and rufous-brown crown are conclusive. Calls include a 'prew' and a repeated 'pupupupu'. The **Brown-cheeked Fulvetta** (15cm) is warm-brown on its upperparts with a greyish head and is otherwise rather nondescript but for its cheerful 'chewe' and 'chwee' calls. The smaller **Nepal Fulvetta** (12cm) has a dark line above the eye. The **White-browed Fulvetta** (11cm, no photo) of high Himalayan scrub and open forest has a conspicuous head pattern of white throat and black face. Also note the white, black-bordered supercilium broadening behind the eye and a rufous crown-stripe. The **Red-billed Leiothrix** (13cm) is a striking bird with red and yellow in the wings as well as on the throat and breast. The similar **Silver-eared Mesia** (15cm, no photo) of the E Himalaya has a black cap and white face-patch.

The **Rufous Sibia** (21cm) is a striking bird with a loud, ringing call. The handsome **White-browed Shrike Babbler** (16cm) is pure white below and grey-and-black above, with a broad white band above and behind the eye and chestnut in the wings. Note the hooked upper mandible. The **Green Shrike Babbler** (13cm, no photo) is smaller and rather nondescript grey-green with a greyer head and yellowish underparts. It has a short, thick bill. The **Chestnut-tailed Minla** (14cm) is easily recognisable. In the C and E Himalaya we find the **Blue-winged Minla** (15cm, no photo), which is grey-brown with blue on its crown, in the tail and in the wings. The **Winter Wren** (9cm) is a familiar but tiny little bird with a cocked-up tail. It produces a surprisingly loud song and rattling call. Superficially similar is the **Scaly-breasted Wren Babbler** (10cm), but this bird doesn't have any tail. Note the rows of light dots on the crown and the dark scales on the underparts, which can be white in some and fulvous in other individuals. Its call is a loud 'tsjik' and the song is a rapid warble that goes up and down the scale, while the near-identical **Nepal Wren Babbler** (10cm, no photo) emits a song that consists of eight or nine very high but slightly descending notes. It doesn't have white dots on the crown.





1 Rufous Sibias breed in forests up to the treeline and winter down in the foothills all along the Himalaya.
2 White-browed Shrike Babblers have a similar habitat and distribution but are normally not as numerous.
3 Chestnut-tailed Minlas also inhabit the higher Himalayan forests while descending in winter.
4 Winter Wrens are common around the treeline and winter down to below 1500m.
5 Scaly-breasted Wren Babblers inhabit moist undergrowth of forests, often near water, and up to around the treeline. They winter in the foothills of the Himalaya.

Larks

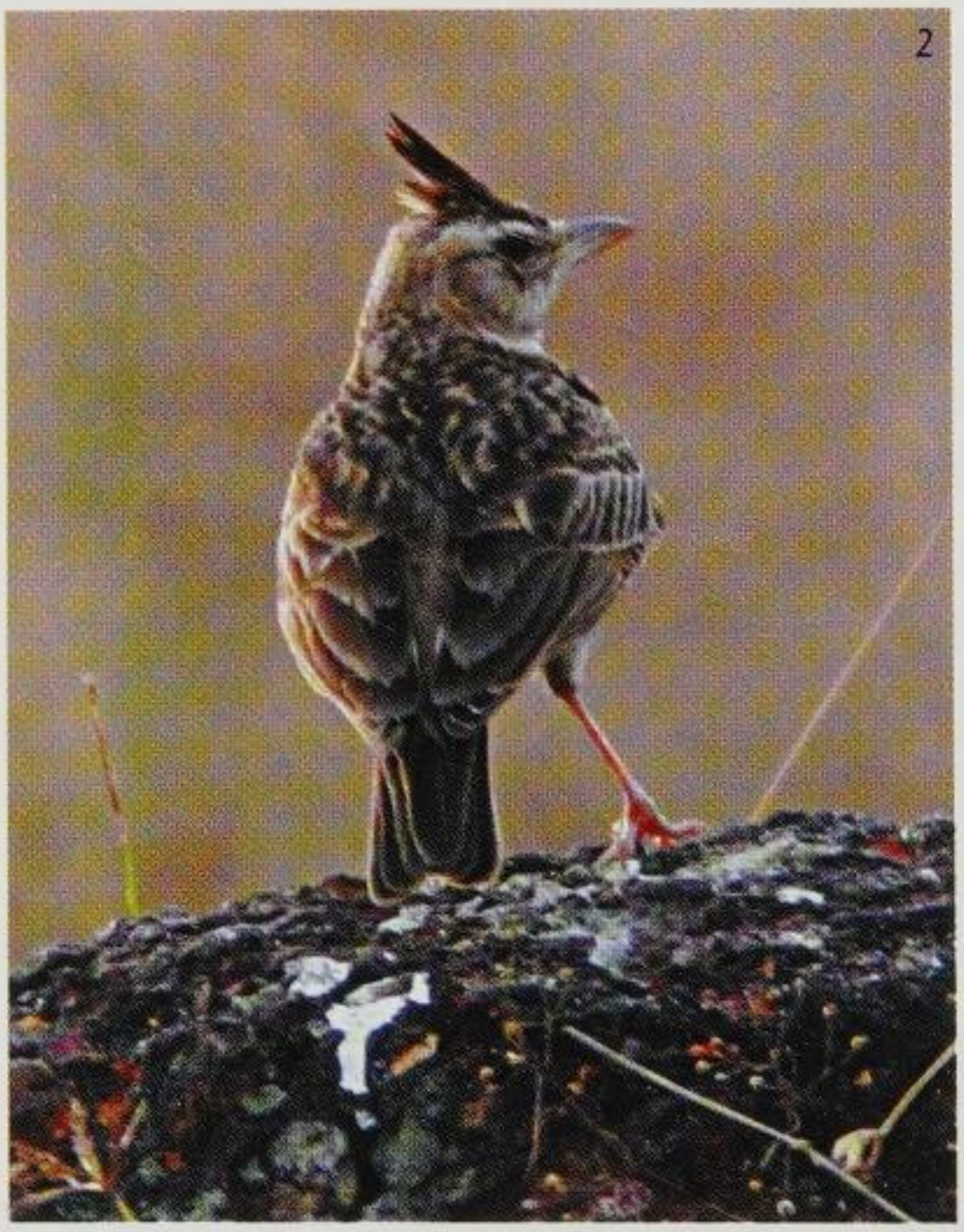
Oriental Skylarks are found in fields and meadows in W, N, and C India.

A large family of dull-coloured ground birds. Important for identification are size, occurrence of crest, extent of streaking on the breast, colour of bill and the occurrence of dark patches on the sides of the breast. They have dry, chirping calls and very diverse, musical songs.

As the subcontinent's most familiar lark, the **Oriental Skylark** (17cm) is drab in coloration. It has a streaked crown with a small crest that is not always visible. Note the rufous wing-panel. The **Indian Bushlark** (14cm) is quite similar with a brighter rufous wing-panel, no crest and much heavier bill. In S India and along the E coast it is replaced by the almost identical but heavier streaked and thicker-billed **Jerdon's Bushlark** (15cm, no photo). The **Bengal Bushlark** (15cm) is darker grey above and browner buff below. Calls a wheezy 'dzeeee' in song flight. The thick-billed **Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark** (13cm) is dull-grey and a little streaked but the male has black on the underparts, spilling out into the neck and through the eye and leaving a white area over the cheeks.

2 Indian Bushlarks breed in open dry country with scattered bushes.
3 Ashy-crowned Sparrow Larks (here male and female) inhabit dry open and stony areas in much of India and Pakistan.
4 Bengal Bushlarks reside in parts of the N and NE.

Crested Larks are found in desert, semi-desert and dry cultivation in N and NW India.

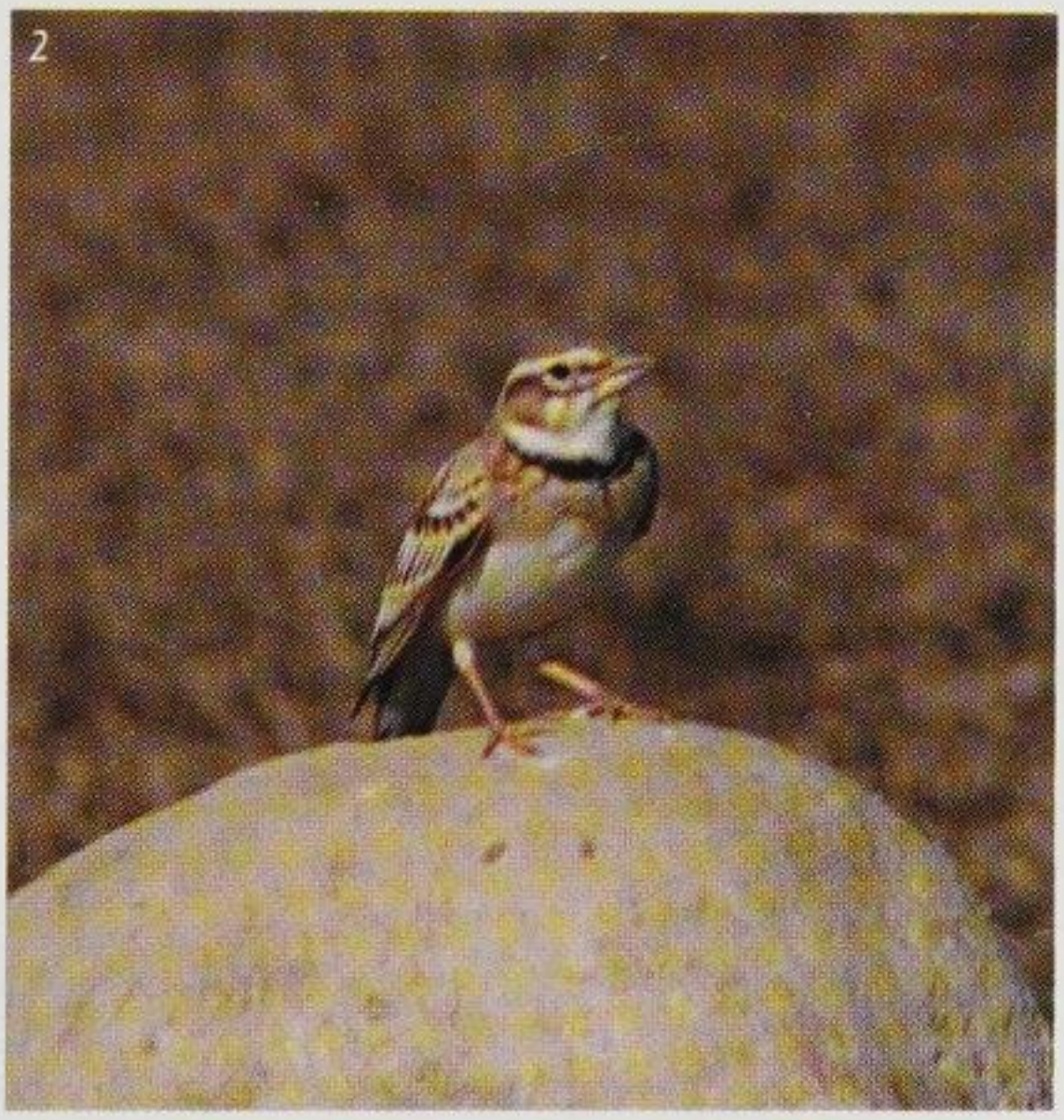


Crested Larks (18cm) are easily recognised by their sharply pointed crest. They utter musical 'tee-yur' or 'tjuwee' calls, not dissimilar to the call of the **Malabar Lark** (15cm) of the SW, which is darker, more heavily streaked and rufous below. **Greater Short-toed Larks** (15cm) are less heavily streaked than sky- and bushlarks. They have dark patches on the sides of the breast but these are often indistinct. The smaller **Hume's Short-toed Lark** (15cm, no photo) is greyer without streaking on the crown and breast. It breeds in Ladakh and Pakistan and winters in the NW.

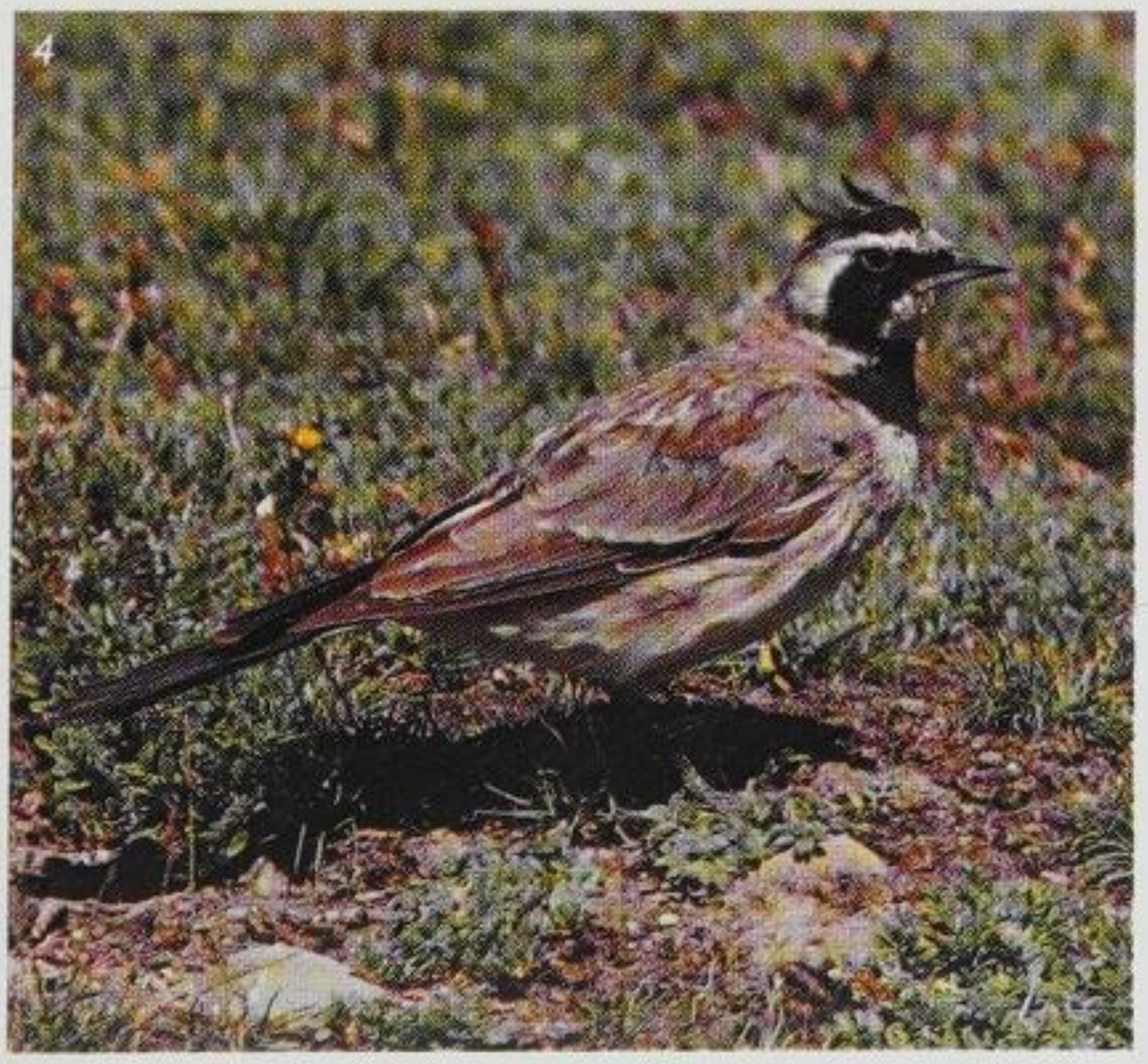
2 Malabar Larks are seen in SW India where they breed on dry fields and grassland.
3 Greater Short-toed Larks gather on dry fields and open flats in N, W and C India.
4 Oriental Skylark (see p 159).

Sand Larks occur in N India on fields, mudflats, often along rivers and reservoirs.

The **Sand Lark** (13cm) is small and unremarkable in plumage. It is grey-brown with a lightly streaked breast. Its crown feathers are often raised as a modest crest. Troupes of large **Bimaculated Larks** (18cm) can be spotted around wetlands in NW India in winter. Note the heavy bill, the black breast-band and white tail tip. The **Rufous-tailed Lark** (16cm) is almost entirely rufous-brown - a bit duller on the face - with a heavy bill. The **Horned Lark** (20cm) has obvious characteristics.

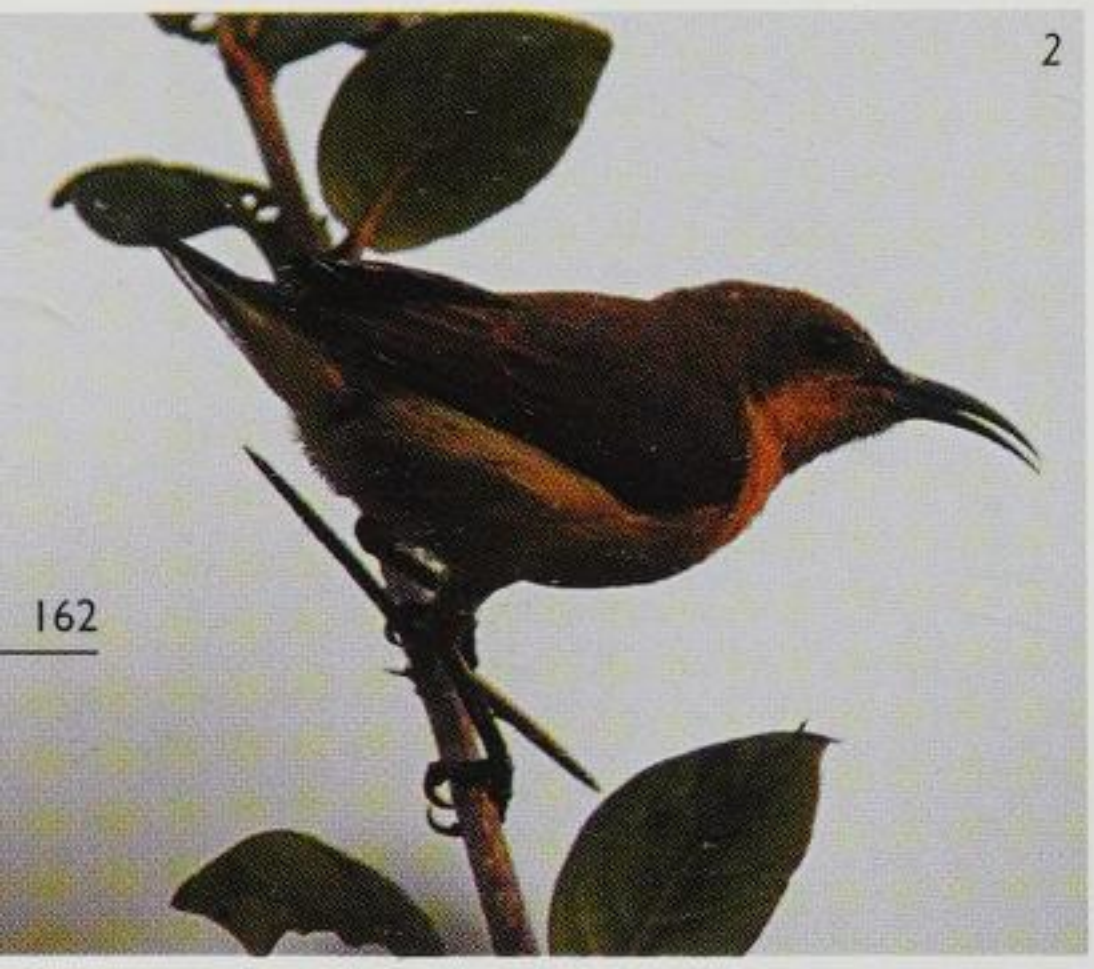


2 Bimaculated Larks visit dry mudflats and fields.
3 Rufous-tailed Larks are found in scrub and fields in much of C, W and S India.
4 Horned Larks breed and winter in the Trans-Himalayan cold deserts.



Sunbirds

Purple Sunbirds are found in all sorts of wooded areas and gardens throughout the subcontinent.



2

2 Female Purple Sunbird.
3 Little Spiderhunters are resident in moist forests in the SW and NE.
4 Loten's Sunbirds breed in open forests and gardens in S India.

3

Small, colourful birds that mainly feed on the nectar of flowers, for which they have down-curved bills and long, tubular tongues. The males of most species have a metallic shine to parts of their plumage. Males of some species are duller coloured in eclipse plumage and resemble females.

The **Purple Sunbird** (10cm) is entirely black with a purple-blue gloss in sunlight. The female is grey above and yellowish below. **Loten's Sunbird** (13cm) is similar to the Purple Sunbird but has a duller grey belly and a much longer, stronger down-curved bill. The **Little Spiderhunter** (14cm) could be confused for a female sunbird with its dull plumage, but its down-curved bill is longer than any sunbird's. Note also the yellow belly.

4

Crimson Sunbirds inhabit forests and gardens in the Himalayan foothills and the N half of the W Ghats.

The male of the **Crimson Sunbird** (15cm) is red on the head, breast and upperparts. It has a blackish fore-crown and moustachial stripe and a yellow rump as well as a purple/green-black tail. Females are smaller and entirely greenish without other markings. **Fire-tailed Sunbirds** (10-15cm) are unmistakable in male plumage. Females are smaller and greenish with a yellow rump and reddish tail while the female of **Mrs Gould's Sunbird** (10cm, no photo) of the Himalaya doesn't have the reddish tail. The male (15cm) is like a Crimson Sunbird but with a yellow belly. The **Green-tailed Sunbird** (10-15cm) has a purple-black head, upper back and throat, while the underparts are orange and yellow. The tail has a greenish cast in certain light. Females are smaller, much like female Crimson but with darker lower mandible of the bill.

2

3

4

2 Female Crimson Sunbird.
3 Fire-tailed Sunbirds - here a female - breed in Himalayan forests up to the treeline and winter down to around 1000m.
4 Green-tailed Sunbirds are confined to the Himalaya where they are seen in forests almost up to the treeline.

Purple-rumped Sunbirds inhabit scrub and undergrowth in the S half of India and the E.

2 Crimson-backed Sunbirds prefer slightly better forested habitats and only occur in the W Ghats.
3 Black-throated Sunbirds of the C and E Himalaya prefer scrub and forest edges.
4 Purple Sunbird male in eclipse plumage.

Male **Purple-rumped Sunbirds** (10cm) are brilliantly coloured, while females are dull green on their mantle and yellowish below, with grey face and throat. Tiny **Crimson-backed Sunbirds** (8cm) differ from Purple-rumped Sunbirds by an additional deep red breast-band below the purple throat. The female doesn't have a grey throat and is dull-coloured apart from a purple rump. Note also the yellow belly. The **Black-throated Sunbird** (15cm) is black on the head with a reddish cast on shoulders and throat. It is otherwise dark grey with a bluish tail. Females are like Crimson but with yellowish rumps.

Flowerpeckers & white-eyes

Oriental White-eyes are found in all types of open forests, gardens, village groves etc. throughout the subcontinent.

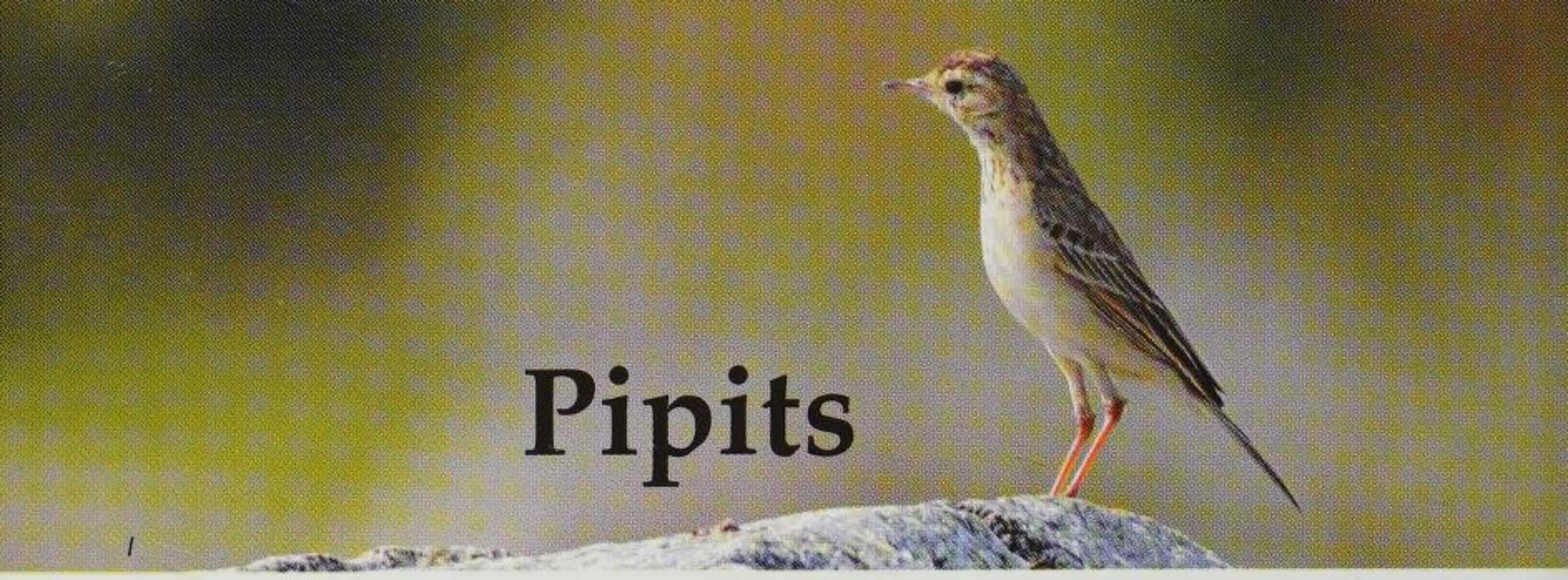
Flowerpeckers resemble sunbirds in their active, almost nervous behaviour and high-pitched calls but they have shorter tails and bills and are duller in colour. The birds of both families are fond of nectar they find in flowers and supplement their diets with berries and small insects.

By far not as restless as flowerpeckers and more gregarious, **Oriental White-eyes** (10cm) are small greenish birds sometimes connected to the family. They call a typical 'pree-pree' while they chase and follow each other through the trees. When seen at close range the yellow vent and broad white eye-ring become apparent. **Pale-billed Flowerpeckers** (8cm) are greenish above and light below like most flowerpeckers and are distinguished by their pale, horn-coloured bills. **Plain Flowerpeckers** (8cm) instead have dark grey bills. The **Thick-billed Flowerpecker** (9cm) doesn't dramatically deviate from the others' plumage pattern, but it has a much thicker, dark bill and shows fine, light streaking on the flanks. **Fire-breasted Flowerpeckers** (7cm) are blue-black on the upperparts with red on the upper breast and a dark line over the middle of the belly.

2 Pale-billed Flowerpeckers, like other flowerpeckers, inhabit a wide range of wooded areas and gardens and are distributed in much of India apart from the NW plains.
3 Plain Flowerpeckers occur in the SW and the NE.

4 Thick-billed Flowerpeckers are resident in much of India apart from arid regions of the NW.
5 Fire-breasted Flowerpeckers breed and reside along the Himalaya up to well over 2500m.

Pipits



Pipits are somewhat similar to larks but are slimmer, more elongated with finer bills. Identification of various species is difficult and requires close observation of the density of streaking on under- and upperparts, coloration of legs and bill, size, posture and call.

The **Paddyfield Pipit** (15cm) is one of the most common and widespread pipits. They are quite large and are normally warm-buff on the flanks. There tends to be little streaking on the breast. The call is a 'chepep' and a 'tsjip', less drawn-out compared to the calls of the next two species, **Richard's Pipit** (18cm) and **Blyth's Pipit** (15cm), both of which have a high, drawn-out call, and are larger with more erect posture. Blyth's have shorter bills and the dark markings on the median coverts are square while in the first two species they are pointed. **Tawny Pipits** (15cm) are very similar to the species above but are distinguished by faintly streaked or unstreaked upperparts and dark lores. Calls include a sparrow-like 'chelup' but also a 'tseep'. **Water Pipits** (15cm) are light grey above with light streaking. Underparts are whitish with faint streaking. Diagnostic are the black legs.

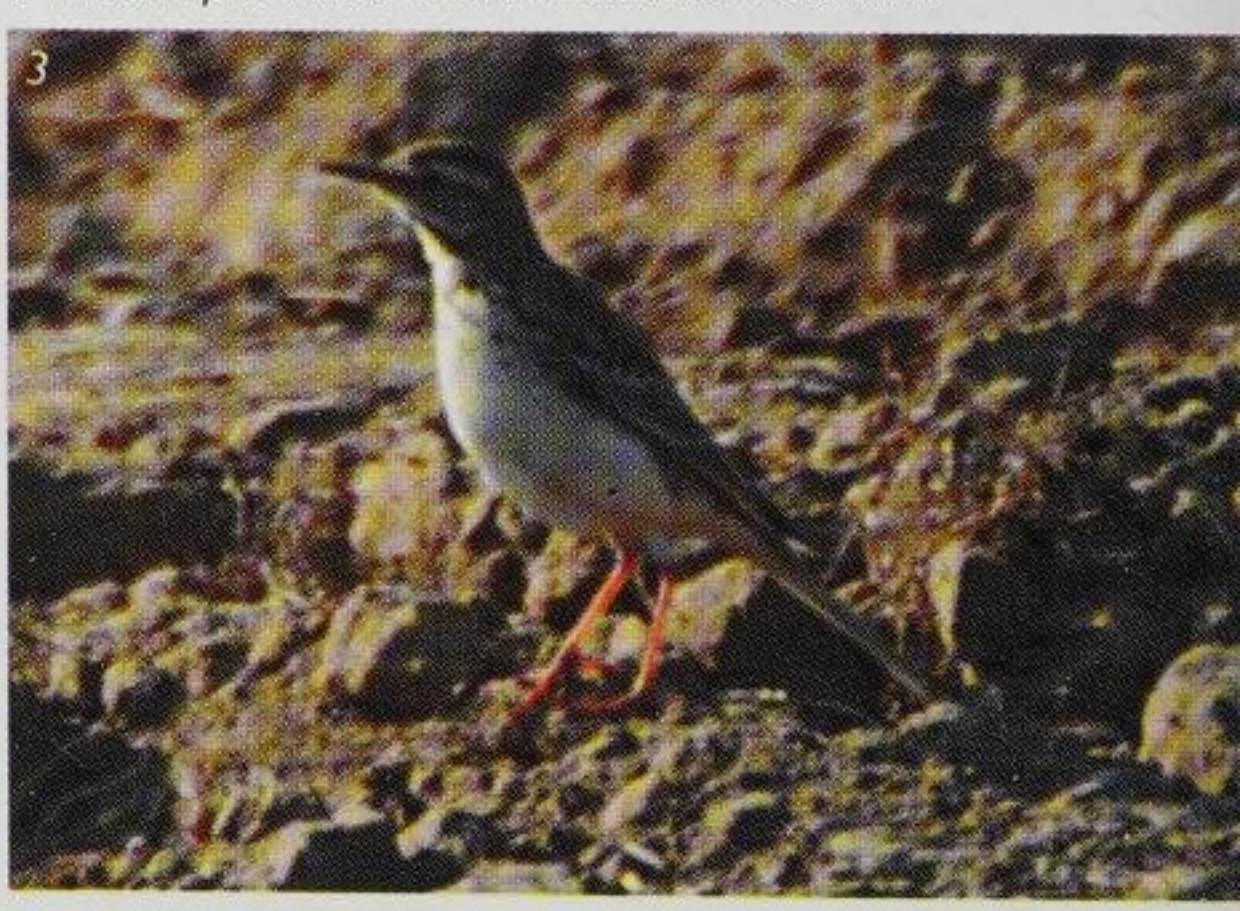
1 Paddyfield Pipits breed and winter throughout the subcontinent and are found in fallow fields, grassland and wetlands.

2 Richard's Pipits are widespread but rare winter visitors.

3 Blyth's Pipits are probably commoner winter visitors than thought.

4 Tawny Pipits winter in drier open habitat, mainly in the NW.

5 Water Pipits winter in small numbers in the NW.



The **Rosy Pipit** (15cm) is relatively easily identified. In winter, look for a pipit that is heavily streaked on both the upper and underparts and has a broad, light supercilium. In summer the underparts turn light pink. Call: a soft, high 'sreep'. The rare **Red-throated Pipit** (15cm) can be distinguished in summer plumage by the brick-red upper breast and face, while the Rosy is not pink in the face and always has a broad light supercilium. **Tree Pipits** (15cm) are heavily streaked and their call is a high 'tsee'. Look for the buff tone on the streaked breast. The very similar **Olive-backed Pipit** (15cm) is less heavily streaked on the slightly greenish mantle. Look for light patches behind ear-coverts. **Long-billed Pipits** (20cm) are the giants amongst the pipits. They show only very light streaking on the mantle while the underparts are warm-buff with a whitish chin. The call is a 'plip, plip'. **Upland Pipits** (17cm) are quite different from other pipits, partly in the way they are evenly heavily streaked all over their plumage, but more so in the way they prowl through thick grass in mountain habitats. It could be wrongly identified as a Grasshopper Warbler (see p 146). The song is a high, far-reaching 'sesu-sesu-sesu-sesu' etc.

1 Rosy Pipits breed around the treeline in the Himalaya and winter down in the foothills and adjacent plains.
2 Olive-backed Pipits breed in high Himalayan forests and winter in much of India apart from the SE and the arid regions of the NW.
3 Red-throated Pipits are rare but could pop up around wetlands.
4 Tree Pipits winter throughout India.
5 Long-billed Pipits occur in the W Himalayan foothills and the W Ghats and move down to the plains in winter.
6 Upland Pipits stay year-round on grassy hillsides in the Himalaya between 600 and 2500m.

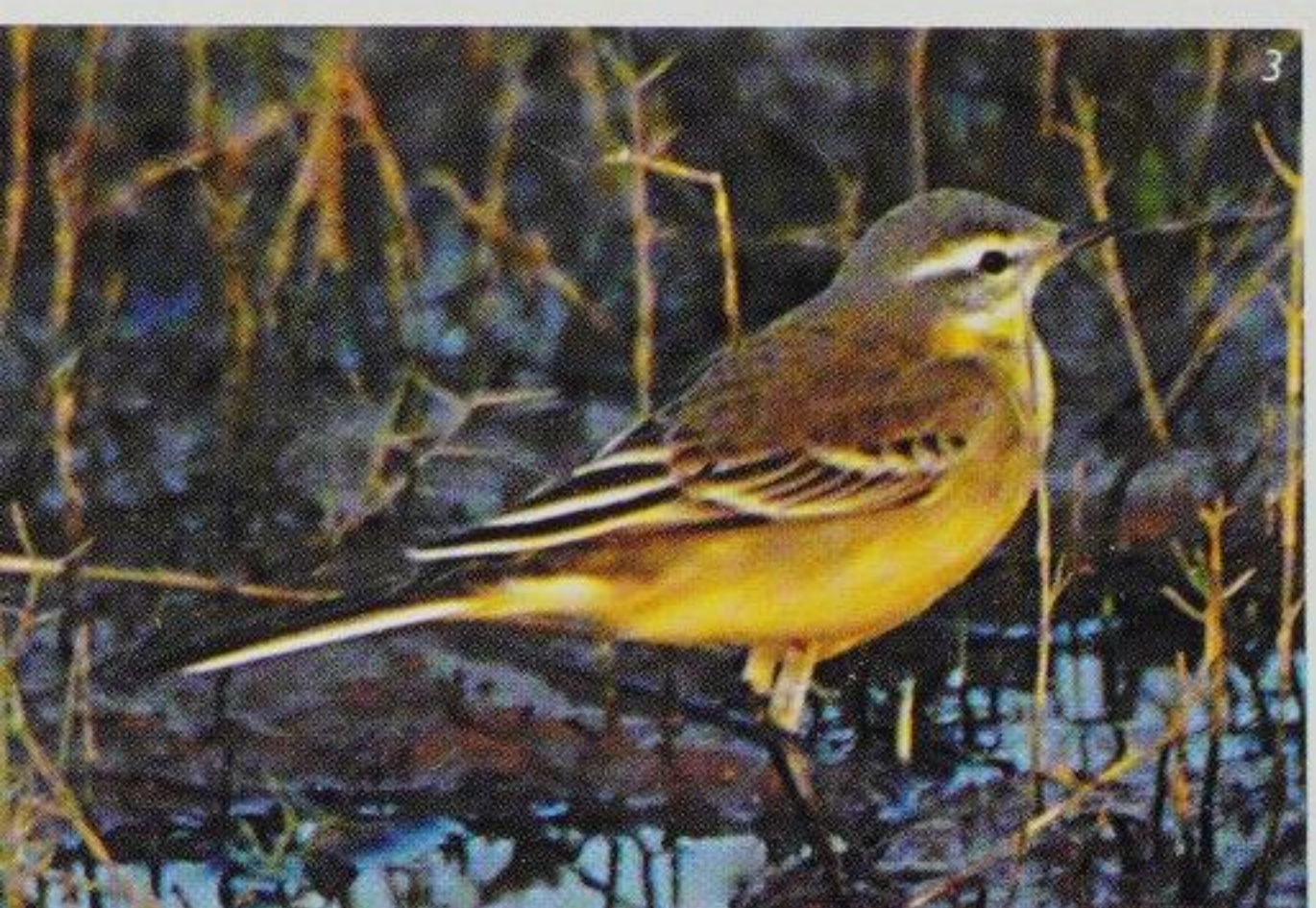
Wagtails

White Wagtails winter throughout the subcontinent while they breed only in the high Himalaya.

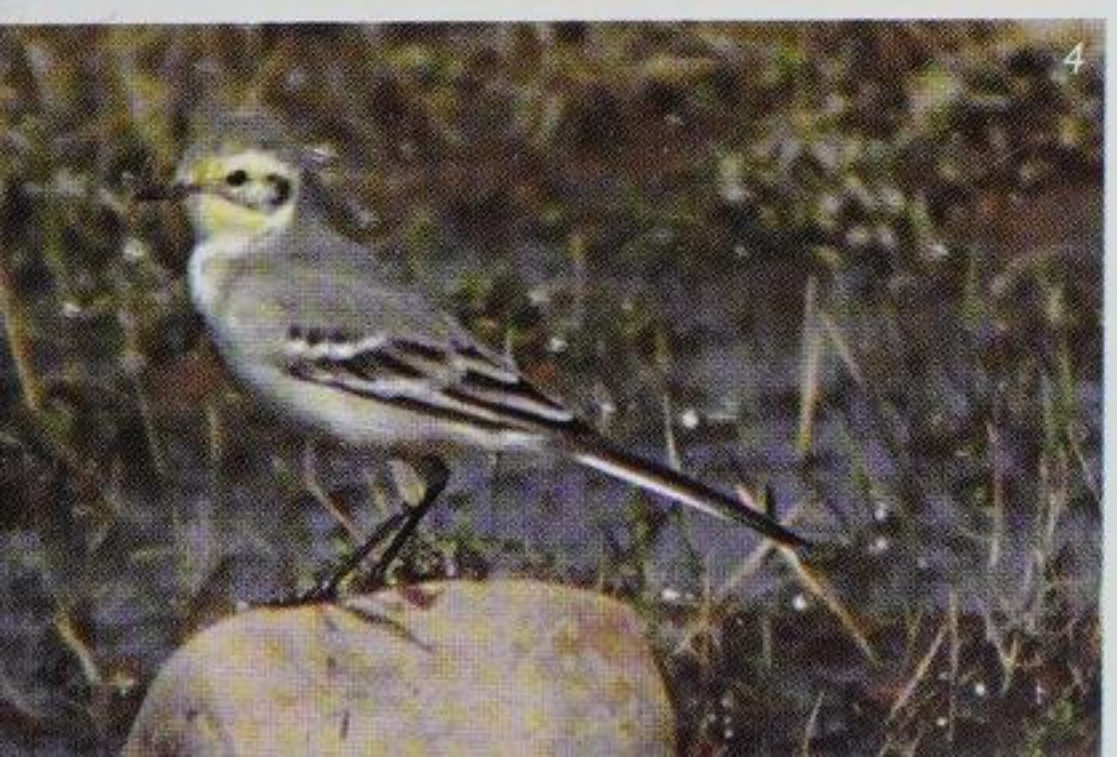
Wagtails are familiar birds of fields, grassland and margins of water bodies. They move about with their bodies carried horizontally and they feed on a variety of insects.

The **White Wagtail** (18cm) occurs in six different races, all with different amounts of black in the face and on the breast and back. They are similar to the **White-browed Wagtail** (21cm) that is entirely black on the upperparts and breast, but is always distinguished by the long white supercilium. The **Yellow Wagtail** (17cm) has eight races with grey, white or yellow on the crown and cheeks. They always have yellow-green backs. Females and non-breeding males are light below and buff above with a light supercilium and are quite similar to non-breeding male or female Citrine Wagtails.

2 White-browed Wagtails are resident over the entire subcontinent.
3 Yellow Wagtails winter throughout India.
4 Juvenile Yellow Wagtail.

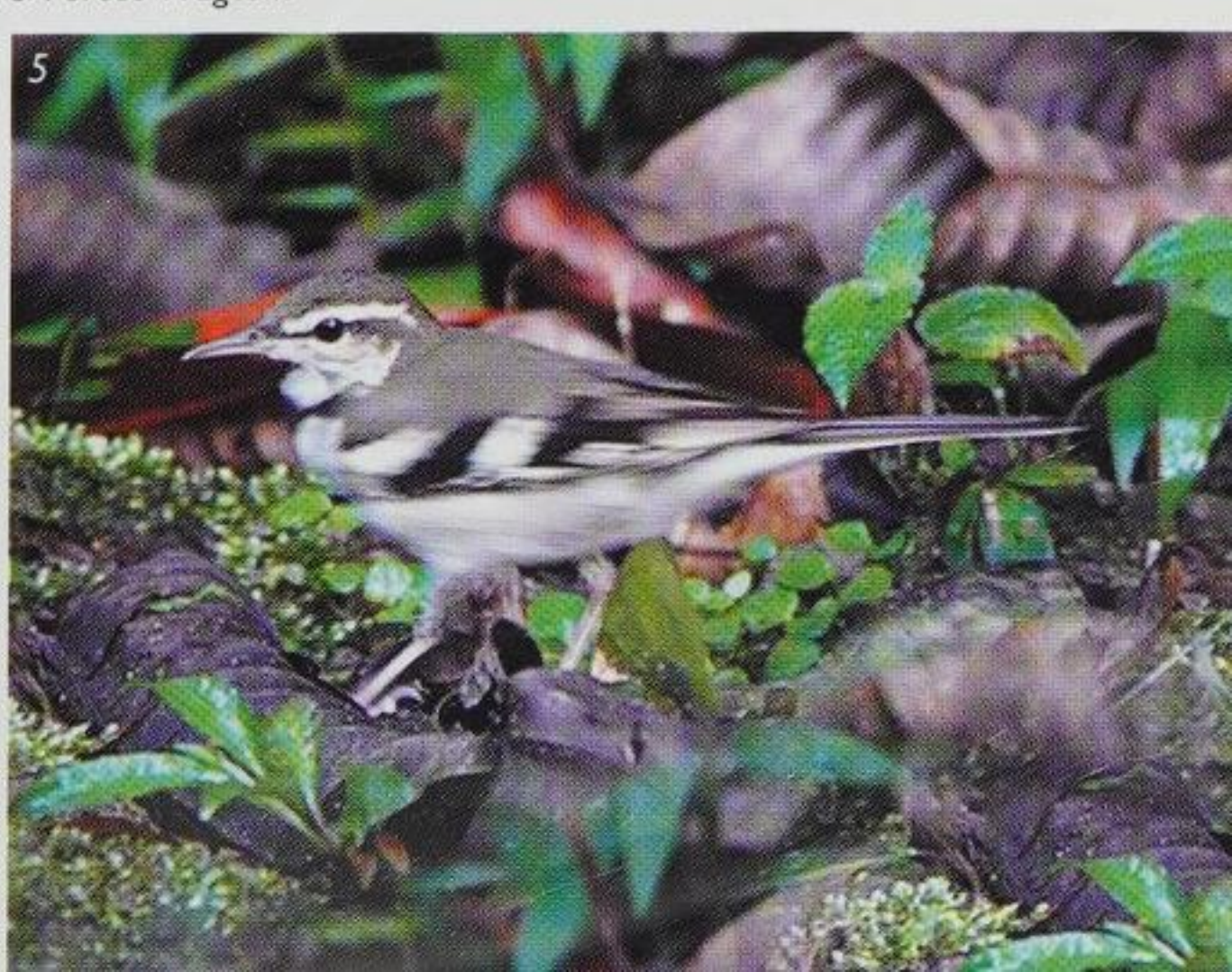


Citrine Wagtails are all-India winter visitors, apart from the S. They breed in the Trans-Himalayan mountains.



Citrine Wagtails (17cm) are brilliantly coloured in full breeding plumage. They are similar to Yellow Wagtails, but the upper parts are greyer. The male breeding has a characteristic yellow head bordered with black in the neck which extends - in some races - down the back. The **Grey Wagtail** (17cm) is identified by its grey head with short white supercilium. It is always yellow on the undertail while the underparts are entirely yellow in male breeding plumage. In the W Ghats look out for the cryptic plumage of the **Forest Wagtail** (17cm) with its two black breast-collars and black wings with broad and well-defined white bands.

2 Yellow Wagtail.
3 Grey Wagtails - here a female - breed near streams in the Himalaya and winter throughout the subcontinent.
4 Juvenile Citrine Wagtail.
5 Forest Wagtail.



Accentors

Rufous-breasted Accentors breed around the treeline and winter down to 600m.

Accentors look a bit like sparrows but have thin bills fit for eating insects and small seeds. In India, accentors are confined to the Himalaya.

The **Rufous-breasted Accentor** (15cm) is an unpretentious but handsome Himalayan resident that gives its presence away with a short metallic rattle. Note the orange breast, dark streaking of the flanks and a buff and orange supercilium. The similarly orange-breasted **Robin Accentor** (17cm, no photo) of the higher Himalaya has unstreaked flanks and a uniformly grey head. **Altai Accentors** (15cm) have orange-brown streaked underparts. The white throat with dark lines and the light supercilium distinguish them from the larger **Alpine Accentor** (17cm) whose head and chest are grey, and the throat finely barred with black-and-white. The **Black-throated Accentor** (15cm) is sandy-brown with a black chin. It has a black face-mask with a light supercilium. The similar **Brown Accentor** (15cm, no photo) of the Trans-Himalaya has a white chin. **Maroon-backed Accentors** (15cm, no photo) of the high Himalaya are blue-grey on the head, breast and wings and maroon on the back and belly. Note the white irises.

2 Altai Accentors winter throughout the Himalaya from 1500m to 4000m.
3 Alpine Accentors breed around the treeline and show only minor altitude movements in winter.
4 Black-throated Accentors winter in the W Himalaya and Pakistan hills.

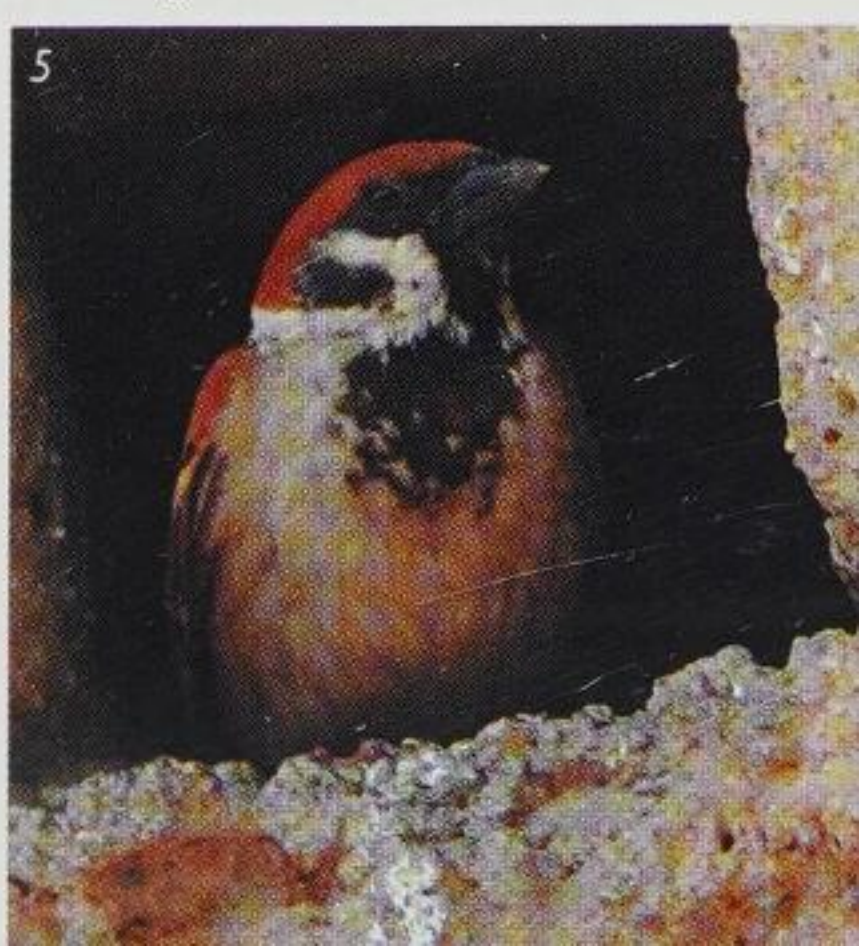
Sparrows

Russet Sparrows are common in the temperate forests of the Himalaya.

Sparrows are gregarious, drab-coloured birds with cone-shaped bills for feeding on seeds.

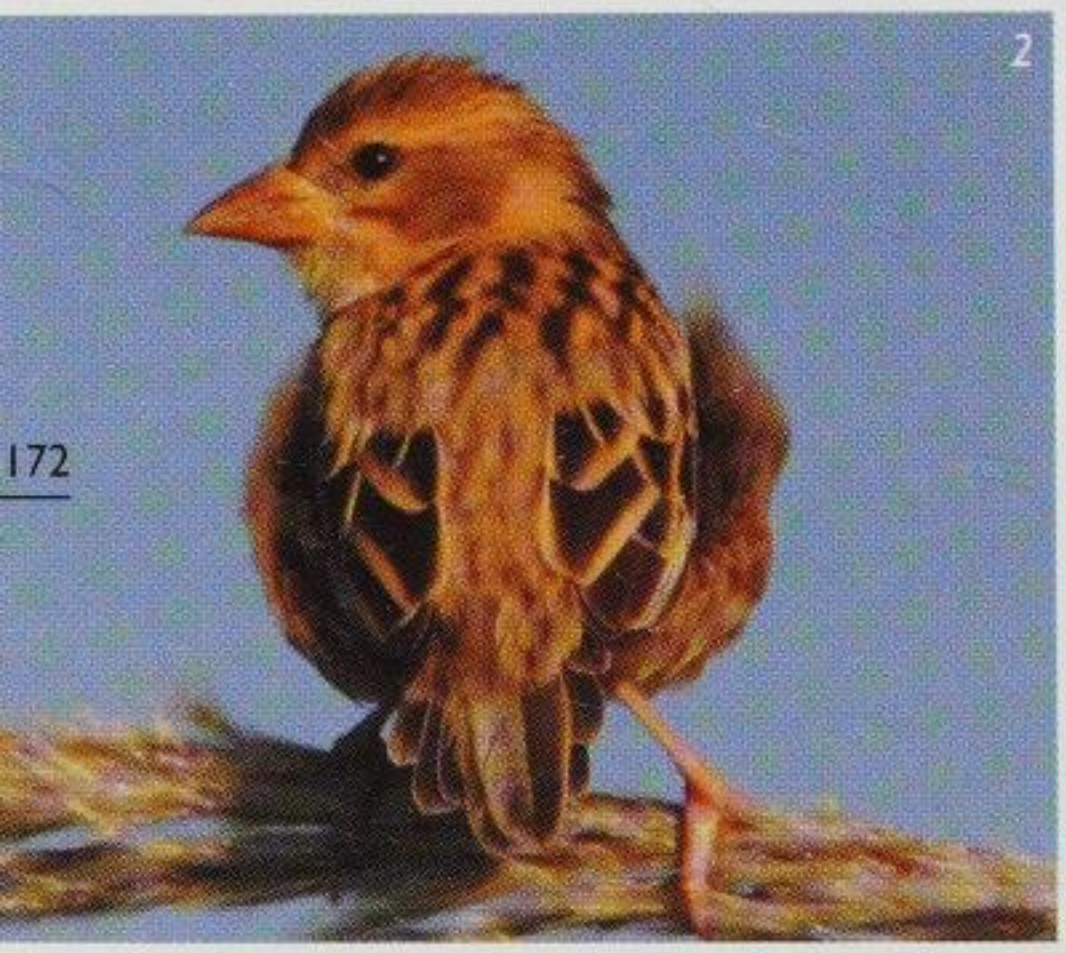
The **Russet Sparrow** (15cm) is a familiar bird of the Himalaya. It is bright orange-brown on the upperparts and has a short black chin-patch. The female is warmer buff-brown compared to other sparrows. **Eurasian Tree Sparrows** (15cm) have a red-brown cap and distinctive black patch on the white ear-coverts. **House Sparrows** (15cm) are ubiquitous and don't require much description. In NW India, look out for **Spanish Sparrows** (15.5cm, no photo) within wintering flocks of sparrows. The males are heavily striped with black on the underparts and back. The female shows light streaking on the underparts. **Sind Sparrows** (12cm) are rare but seen around wetlands near Delhi. They have a shorter and cleaner black chin compared to the House Sparrow. The grey on the crown curves down along the neck and is bordered on the inside with warm-brown. **Chestnut-shouldered Petronias** (13.5cm) are unstreaked dull grey-brown with chestnut shoulder-patches and a clear white wing-bar. The male has a yellow throat-patch.

2 Chestnut-shouldered Petronias are resident throughout India and summer visitors to Pakistan.
3 Eurasian Tree Sparrows reside in cultivation and villages in the C and E Himalaya and the hills of Pakistan.
4 Sind Sparrows occur near water in the Pakistan river systems and increasingly along canals in NW India.
5 House Sparrows are abundant throughout the subcontinent.



Weavers & munias

Baya Weavers - here a male building a nest - reside in wetlands and trees not far from water throughout the subcontinent.



2 Female Baya Weaver.
3 Streaked Weavers occur in marshes and reedbeds in Pakistan and regions in NW, S and NE India.
4 Streaked Weaver in winter plumage.
5 Red Avadavats are found in reedbeds over much of the subcontinent, except for parts of the S.

Weavers are stockier than sparrows, with thicker bills. They weave balloon-shaped nests out of strips of grass with long, dangling entrance tubes. Munias are smaller and although they are seen picking up long strips of grass for their nests, they don't weave.

Baya Weavers (15cm) are buff or yellow-brown, broadly streaked on the upperparts. Males in the breeding season develop a black face and chin with yellow crown and breast. **Streaked Weavers** (15cm) are greyer and covered in grey-black streaking. The male has yellow patches in the face in winter while in summer the face is black with a yellow cap. **Black-breasted Weavers** (15cm, no photo) of N India always have a whitish or yellowish throat contrasting with a broad black breast-band that is reduced to a patch of dark streaking in the female. Both sexes have a broad yellow supercilium and ear-patch in winter plumage. **Red Avadavats** (9cm) are readily identified in male plumage. Females are brown with red rumps and bills. Juveniles are grey-brown with darker wings that show two fine light wing-bars.

Indian Silverbills reside in grass and scrub with a distribution throughout the subcontinent.

Indian Silverbills (10cm) are yellow-brown with dark grey bills. Their large white rump-patch sets them apart from the similarly coloured juvenile **Scaly-breasted Munia** (10cm), the adult of which is bright red-brown in the face and on the upper breast and finely scaled black on the rest of the underparts. The **White-rumped Munia** (10cm) is chocolate-brown with a white belly and small rump-patch. **Black-headed Munias** (10cm, no photo) are similarly patterned but with white belly; the head is black, contrasting with the dark brown back and bright, red-brown rump and tail. They also have some black on the under-belly. **Black-throated Munias** (10cm) are warm reddish-brown with darker upperparts and a blackish area in the face that is absent in juveniles.

2 Scaly-breasted Munias - here male and female - are found in scrub, cultivation and open woodland throughout the area apart from the drier regions of the NW.
3 White-rumped Munias are resident in similar habitat in S, C and NE India.
4 Black-throated Munias inhabit moister habitats in the W Ghats.

Yellow-breasted Greenfinches are found in forests, gardens and scrub in the Himalaya up to the treeline while they winter down in the foothills.

Finches

Finches are songbirds of Himalayan mountain habitats that come in an assortment of colours. All species have heavy bills used for cracking pits and seeds.

The **Yellow-breasted Greenfinch** (14cm) is deep green with yellow on the throat, underparts, supercilium, in wing-patches and to the sides of the tail. Green-and-yellow flocks produce twittering calls, less metallic compared to those of the **European Goldfinch** (15cm), which has a characteristic red face and yellow areas in the black wings. The **Fire-fronted Serin** (12cm) is a small, brown, compact finch with black in the face that continues into streaking on the underparts. The **Plain Mountain Finch** (15cm) is a dull-looking brown bird that gathers into impressive flocks, often together with Altai Accentors (see p 170). Seen close-up, the bird shows streaking, white wing-bars and a light supercilium, while juveniles are warmer brown.

2 European Goldfinches prefer similar habitats in the W Himalaya.

3 Fire-fronted Serins dwell in less wooded habitats in the high Himalaya and down to 600m in winter.

4 Plain Mountain Finches are found on grassy slopes, alpine meadows above the treeline in summer and down to lower slopes, also in open forest in winter.

Female Red-headed Bullfinch.

The **Red-headed Bullfinch** (17cm) is a handsome finch; orange-red with black wings and with grey wing-bars and back. Females are greyer with green cast to nape. They call a mellow 'pu-pu'. The rare **Orange Bullfinch** (14cm, no photo) is similar but the back is orange instead of grey. The **Black-and-yellow Grosbeak** (22cm) is a large finch with a massive bill. It is yellow with black head, tail and wings. Females are light brown with grey heads.

2 Red-headed Bullfinch - here a male - live in temperate forests of the Himalaya, mostly above 1800m.
3 Black-and-yellow Grosbeaks breed and winter in oak and deodar forests in the W Himalaya.
4 Female Black-and-yellow Grosbeak.

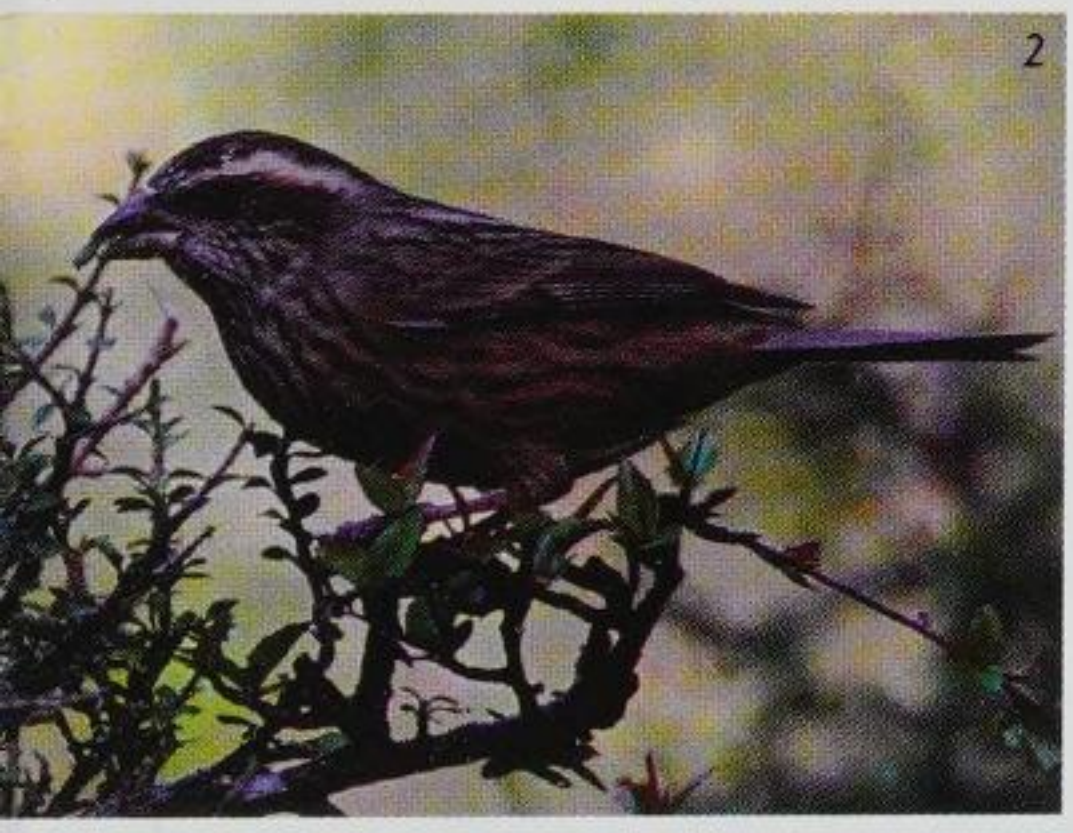
Spot-winged Grosbeaks summer in mixed Himalayan forests to the treeline and winter down to 1200m, also in village groves.

The male **Spot-winged Grosbeak** (22cm) looks like the Black-and-yellow Grosbeak, but the black extends to back and rump. The wings show a white patch and line of spots. Females are light-to-yellow, heavily streaked with black. The **White-winged Grosbeak** (22cm, no photo) is similar but it has a yellowish rump. The yellow on the belly is duller and black on breast extends further down (male). **Spectacled Finches** (17cm) are uncommon but distinctive. The male **Collared Grosbeak** (22cm) looks like the Black-and-Yellow Grosbeak but has an orange cast on neck and rump. The female is bright green with dark wings and a grey head.

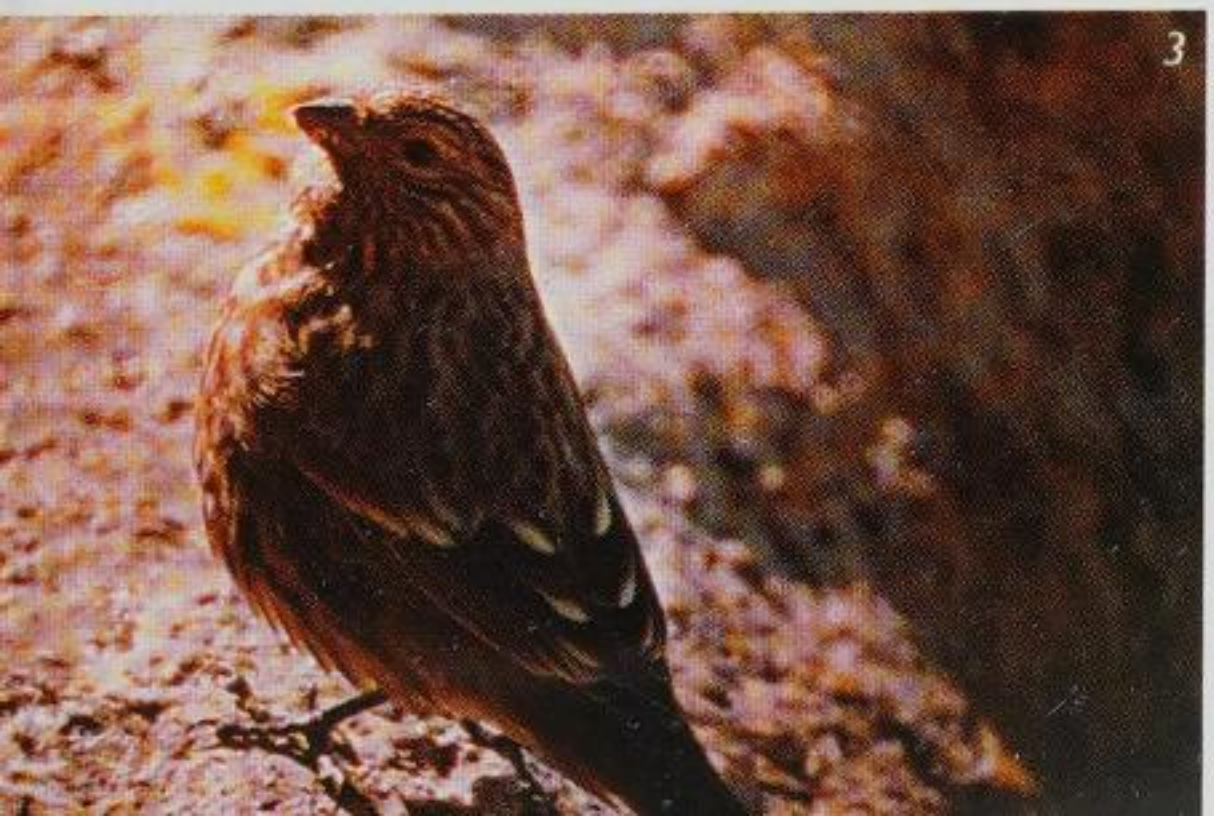
2 Male Spot-winged Grosbeak.
3 Collared Grosbeaks - here a female - are resident in the Himalaya.
4 Spectacled Finches breed in Himalayan forests up to the treeline.
5 Beautiful Rosefinches (see p 177) breed around and above the treeline and winter down to 2000m. Here a female.

Male Pink-browed Rosefinch.

The **Pink-browed Rosefinch** (15cm) is a very handsome bird. The streaked female is warm buff-brown with a broad buff supercilium and light throat. The very similar **Beautiful Rosefinch** (14cm) is much paler-pink in the male. The ground-colour of the heavily streaked underparts of the female are much lighter than in female Pink-browed. The larger **White-browed Rosefinch** (17cm, no photo) has pinkish underparts (male) and differs from other rosefinches in the broad pink supercilium that ends in white, along with a dark line behind the eye. **Red-mantled Rosefinches** (18cm) are large. The male has pink underparts like other species but note the silvery streaks on the otherwise pink supercilium and face. The female doesn't have any particular features apart from a very faint light supercilium. The following two species are found in the high W and C Himalaya: The **Great Rosefinch** (19cm, see overleaf) has light flecks on the pink-red underparts while the upperparts are unstreaked brown. Note that the head is also red. Females are dull-brown and entirely streaked without a light supercilium, much like the **Streaked Rosefinch** (19cm), the male of which has some fine light streaking on the breast. The upperparts are brown - down from the hind-crown - and streaked.



2 Pink-browed Rosefinches - here a female - are found in open forest, scrub and on grassy slopes, down to 1000m in winter and up to over 4000m in summer in the W and C Himalaya.
3 Red-mantled Rosefinches - here a female - breed in the high Himalaya and winter down in the foothills.
4 Streaked Rosefinches breed in the highest parts of the W and C Himalaya.



Common Rosefinches breed in the higher Himalaya on slopes with trees, bushes and around villages and cultivation. They winter in India south through the W Ghats.

The **Common Rosefinch** (15cm) is the only finch that winters throughout India down to the south. While females can be quite unobtrusive with their grey-brown, streaked plumage, the males have varying amounts of red in the face and on the breast. Note the 'huweet' call. The **Dark-breasted Rosefinch** (15cm) is deep red with dark breast-band, nape, upperparts and band through the eye. Females are unstreaked and dark brown. The **Tibetan Snowfinch** (17cm) is greyish-buff with large white wing-panels and broad white sides to the tail. The chin is black below the dark bill but note that juveniles are sandier brown with a yellowish bill. **Plain-backed Snowfinches** (15cm, no photo) of similar Trans-Himalayan habitat differ in the black lines over the forehead, white cheeks and dark and white patches in the tail. **Brandt's Mountain Finch** (18cm) is large and is dark in the face and on the forehead, in summer extending to the upper back. It has white fringes to the tail feathers but lacks white wing-panels. This becomes an important identification feature in the non-breeding plumage of the W Himalayan race, which is uniformly light brown without any dark on the head, similar to the Plain Mountain Finch (p 174).

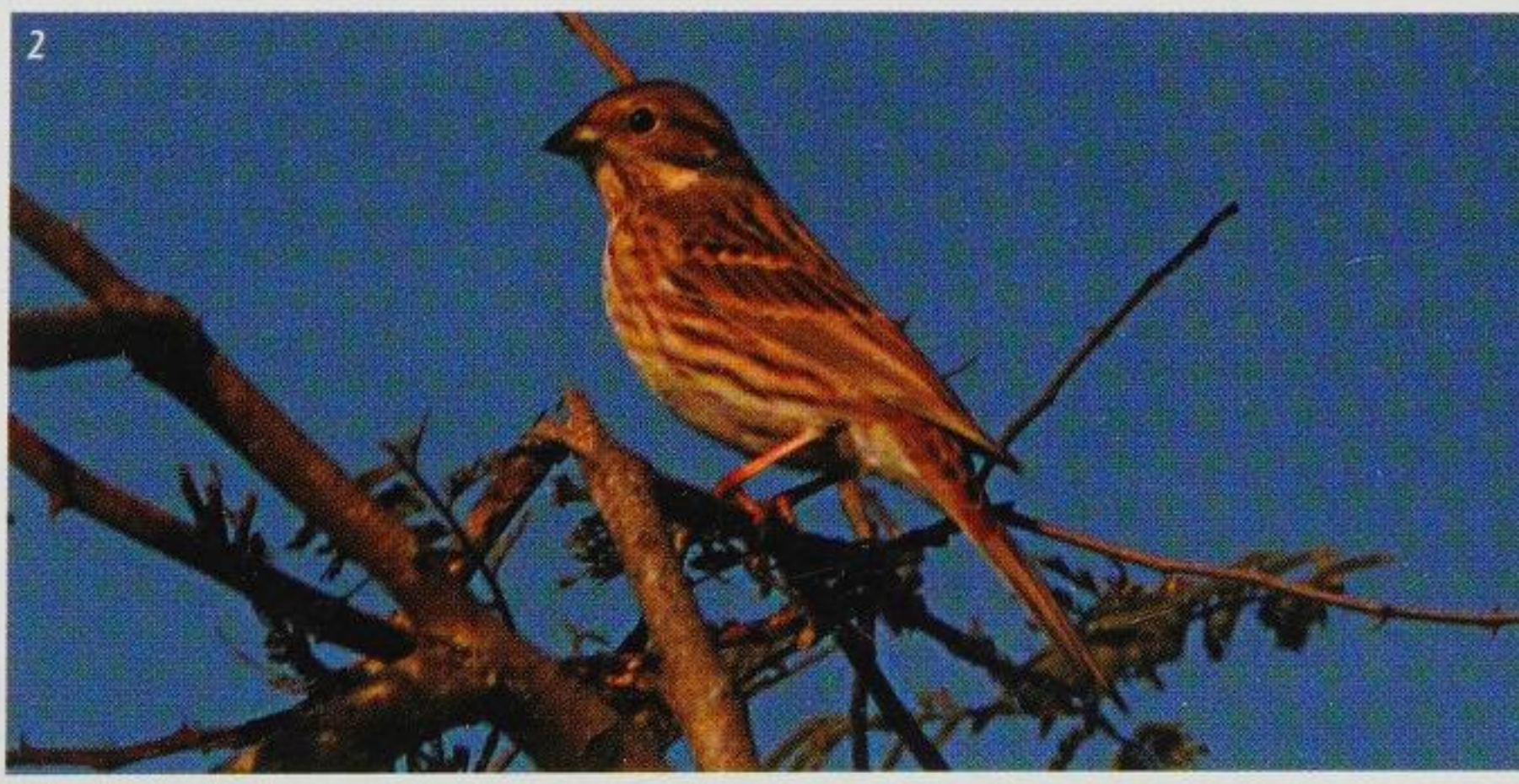
2 Dark-breasted Rosefinches breed around the treeline and even in winter don't venture much below 2000m.
3 Great Rosefinches (previous page) are residents in the W and C Trans-Himalaya.
4 Tibetan Snowfinches breed and winter on grassy and stony slopes in the Trans-Himalaya.
5 Brandt's Mountain Finches are also found only in Trans-Himalayan cold deserts.

Buntings

Rock Buntings breed in the NW and C Himalaya and winter down in the foothills and the plains.

With most species seen in troupes during winter in the plains, buntings are relatively dull-coloured ground-feeding birds that resemble finches in size and build but look larger-bodied and longer-tailed.

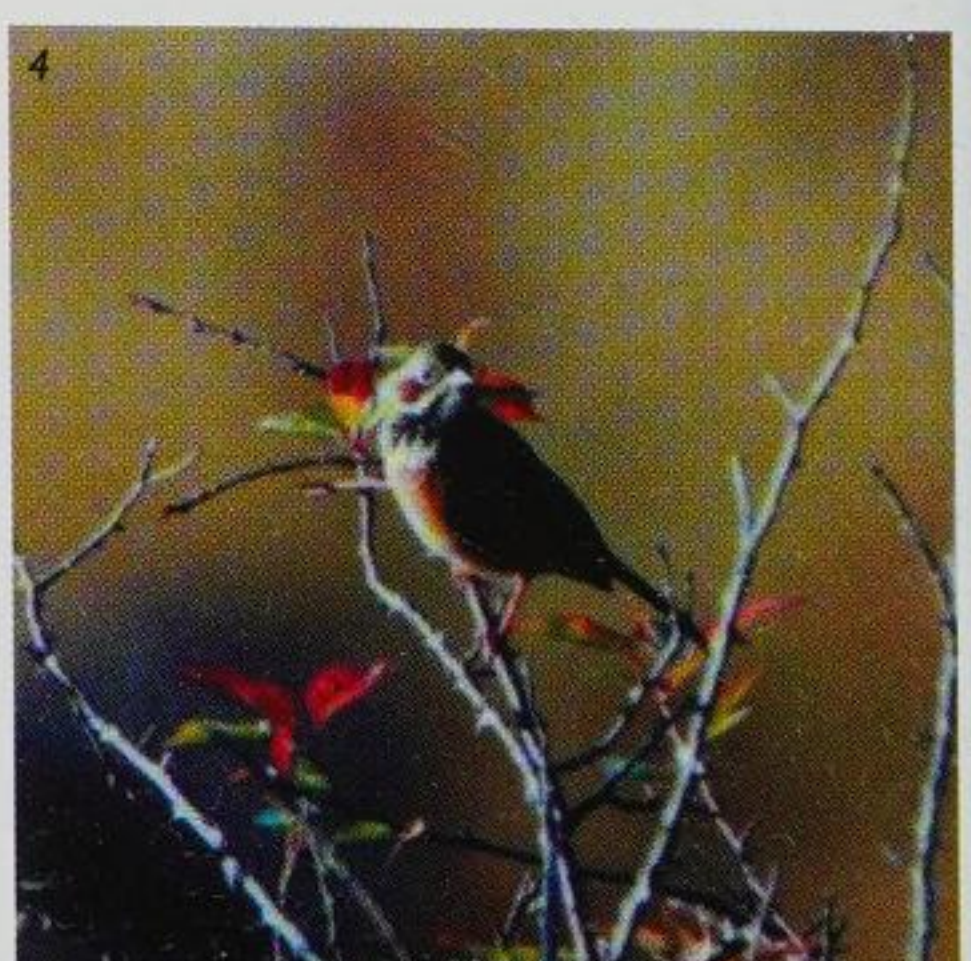
Rock Buntings (15cm) are easily identified by their grey heads with black lines that are less distinct in females. The underparts are warm-chestnut and the tail shows white sides like most buntings. Call: a 'tsee' or 'tsip'. **Pine Buntings** (17cm) are distinguished by a warm-brown rump contrasting with the grey, dark-streaked back. The face of the male is chestnut (mottled in winter) with black-and-white on the crown and at the ear-coverts. Call: a metallic 'tick'. Male **White-capped Buntings** (15cm) have a distinctive head pattern that is duller in winter. Note also the whitish upper breast and chestnut lower breast and back. Females are dull-brown and streaked with no particular head pattern. Call: a high trill. **Grey-necked Buntings** (15cm) are unstreaked grey on head and back and reddish-brown down from the throat. The wings are also red-brown and the pinkish bill and white eye-ring are very conspicuous. Females are duller.



2 Pine Buntings winter in the NW and C Himalaya down to 600m.
3 White-capped Buntings winter in parts of the far NW and C India and breed in the NW Himalaya.
4 Grey-necked Buntings are seen in small numbers in parts of NW, W and C India in winter.

Black-headed Buntings winter on fields and grass in the W half of the subcontinent.

Black-headed Buntings (18cm) are yellow with a black head and chestnut upperparts, but in winter they look very dull yellow with the black and chestnut washed-out and mottled. Females show a hint of the darker cap and have brown streaking on the back. **Red-headed Buntings** (17cm) in male plumage are yellow below and around the neck, with a chestnut face and a greenish, streaked back. Winter plumage is a very faded version, and the female is entirely light with some yellow on the rump. **Crested Buntings** (15cm) are striking and easily recognised, but note that in the female the black is replaced by brown streaking. Call: a soft 'pic'. **Chestnut-eared Buntings** (15cm) have a light grey head with fine streaking on the crown and light (female) to heavy (male) black streaking down from the moustache to the breast, with chestnut on the sides of the lower breast. The resident **House Bunting** (14cm, no photo) is dull-brown with a grey head and breast, mottled with black. It also has a dark eye and moustachial stripe.



2 Red-headed Buntings winter in the W half of India and migrate through the NW.
3 Crested Buntings breed in dry hills with scrub and open woodland in the low Himalaya and C India.
4 Chestnut-eared Buntings are uncommon residents in the Himalaya.

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Mixed species flock of weavers gather over spring crops.

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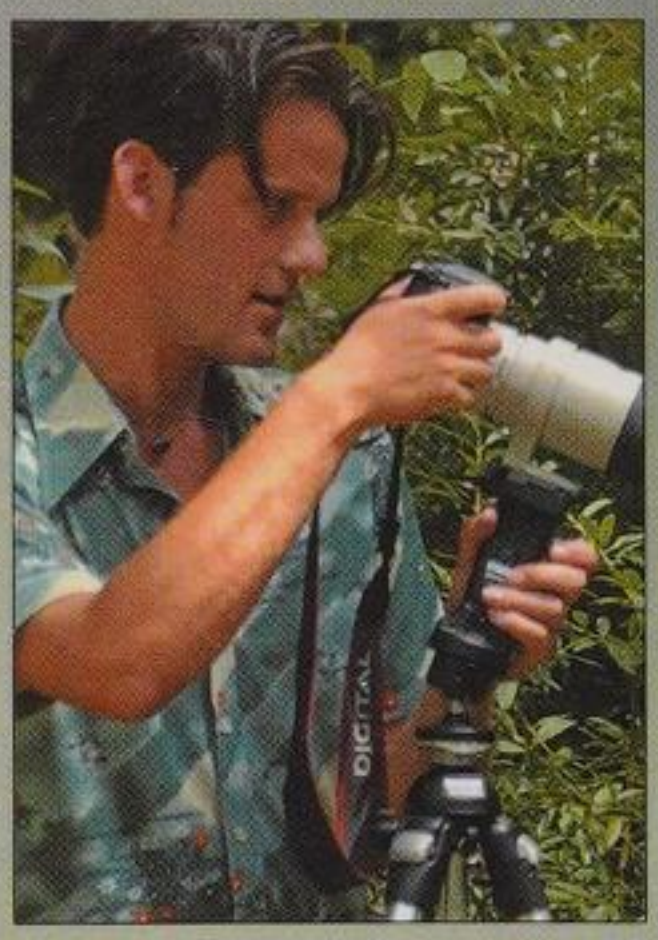
India is one of the world's biodiversity hotspots, hosting more than 12 per cent of all bird species of the planet. *Birds of India* describes over 700 of the most common bird species that are seen on the Indian subcontinent.

This book is meant for a wide audience with a general interest in birds. The text is easy to read and covers the main visual identification characteristics of the birds. It describes their calls, typical manners and distribution. Most of the birds are depicted in striking colour photographs. The first chapter introduces the reader to India's wealth of avian species and the variety of landscapes and nature reserves where they are seen. The reader will learn about bird behaviour and threats to birdlife in India. This book will also serve to introduce the novice to the joys of bird-watching. This is a book every household on the Indian subcontinent should have on its shelves.

About the Author

Jan Willem den Besten was born in The Netherlands in 1970. He started to visit India in the early 1990s and after completing his degree in Environmental Education at Deventer in 1994 he set up a recycling programme in Himachal Pradesh, India. Since 1996 he resumed his childhood hobbies of bird-watching and photography and started to photograph the birds of India. Den Besten's articles on birds are published in scientific magazines and he is involved in various education and training programmes. In 2003 he founded the Kangra Bird Club. He is the author of the book *Birds of Kangra*.



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